Piet Mondrian's early Years

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The Winding Path to Straight Abstraction

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A great work of art, if it accomplishes anything, serves to remind us, or let us say to set us dreaming, of all that is fluid and intangible. Which is to say, the universe. It cannot be understood; it can only be accepted or rejected. If accepted we are revitalized; if rejected we are diminished.

Henry Miller, *On Writing*

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Introduction

Most of the literature on Piet Mondrian – and there is a lot of it, ranging from journalism during his life time to books about his art written as his art grew in popularity in the decades following his death to two recent attempts at biography or partial biography, treat the artist's figurative work and his abstractions as being like Part I and Part II of an epic, in which those two Parts have no relationship to one another, and in fact are contradictory. The drawings and paintings of forests and village scenes, the portraits and studies of lighthouses, churches and windmills, all the representation drawings and paintings that he made from his earliest beginnings pretty much until he left the Netherlands, never to return, in 1919, are not held in the same high regard as the purely geometric compositions he made subsequently and that became synonymous with his name. And the grids of black lines on white ground, with primary colors interspersed with an eye for rhythm and movement above all else, are regarded almost as if Mondrian had a personality change, that the person who worked in one way in his homeland became a totally different being when he based his life in Paris and then London, and, finally, New York.

A primary reason for writing this partial biography focusing on his early development when he was still under the influence of his surroundings and of traditional approaches to representation, is to show it as integral to his entire oeuvre. Even before he created his own living environment, which was a radical break from the places he inhabited in the Netherlands, and invented an unprecedented form of abstraction, Piet Mondrian had immense artistic capacity, and used it to present a very particular and deeply felt vision, that is consistent with all that came afterwards. I have confined myself to the first thirty-seven years of his life in order to focus on his seminal development both because of its own merit and because of the way it was the foundation of all that followed. I intend to contradict the popular notion of Mondrian as a restrained individual who at last let loose.

Whether we are speaking of the biographers who present Mondrian as frenzied in his love of women and jazz clubs, or of those who depict him as a recluse who was content only when sealed in his hermetic existence, they share a vision of Mondrian's pure abstraction as a reaction, interpreted according to the writers' take on the man who made this art, an opposite direction taken out of personal need. I consider everything about Mondrian and his work worthy of a far more intense investigation, and, at the same time, feel it is vital to avoid conclusions about what cannot be known with certainty. Nothing about Mondrian is simple, or easy to characterize, and in delving into the first part of his life, I want only to present what is verifiable, and would rather allow for the man's complexity and ambiguities than take

a point of view. Mondrian was less knowable in some ways, more knowable in others, than the literature to date suggests. At the same time, the man and his art—from a different viewpoint, one that gets to his essence, which was constant throughout his life—in simpler than others make it out to be. I see the entire gambit of Mondrian's life to be a case of continuity. He was, like all of us, someone with contradictions, but he was also constant in the depth of his passion for universal truth, his consuming love of making art, and the priority he gave to his work. I have consulted every possible primary source—his paintings, his letters, accounts by others who knew him (sometimes first hand to me), his under-read and immensely rich writing, and the art itself—and present, in focusing here on his life and work until 1919, the very same person who made the purely geometric art that, in the modern era, is replicated on building facades and pocket books and, in the original, makes news because of its enormous financial value, a recent development. The artist where there is intense debate as to whether four paintings—the pure, abstract, characteristically "Mondrian style" ones, at a museum in Krefeld, belong to the museum or to his heirs, and where it is a major story because in the aggregate the four are worth more than a hundred million artists—was the same one who had to vie drawing lessons to Amsterdam ladies to make ends meet, and who considered to take a job picking olives because he could not pay the rent and put food on the table as a painter. It is not only that his art has changed in financial value; it is that his real values, human and artistic, never varied, from the beginning to the end of his life.

Mondrian was always the same artist, focused on the universe at large, determined to eschew personal biography and his own daily existence in order to serve humankind, everywhere, always, with a presentation of visual beauty that reflected the amazing systems underlying the earth. He recognized the presence of the sun, the forces that cause the ocean waves to break on the dunes, the growth and then the demise of flower blossoms, the effects of vertical and horizontal lines and the interplay of undiluted primary colors, as being possessed of miraculous power. Almost all that has been written about Mondrian to date misses this vital point; this book is part of my effort to bring it to the forefront.

Most of the time that I quote and discuss the sources that, in spite of the occasional worthwhile information they provide, that have, to date, established Mondrian's reputation—from newspaper articles during the artist's lifetime to Michel Seuphor's book which became the bible on the artist after its publication in English and French in the decade following Mondrian's death, (in turn planted the seeds for almost all that followed), to the more recent tomes of Léon Hanssen and Hans Janssen—it is because I feel I am performing think I am performing a necessary service by encouraging future generations to realize that the "on dit," the "this is Mondrian's story," as it exists until now, is largely interpretation to suit the

writers' needs or hopes but has no bearing on the artist's reality.[1] I do not buy into Hans Janssen's vision of Mondrian the lothario or Léon Hanssen's sense of Mondrian the invert; I prefer, rather, to present only what we know with assuredness. I also give credit to all of these sources where I think they guide us correctly—especially the newspaper articles that take us right inside Mondrian's unusual, idiosyncratic digs, but, also, all of the other books when they provide valid facts on the artist's working methods—but when they provide, as they often do, misinformation, getting travel dates wrong or turning an emotionally complex man into a swaggering lothario. I think it is necessary to set the record straight. Did he have syphilis? Did he not have syphilis? Did he paint certain portraits with particular colors to show the effect of sexually transmitted illnesses, ones that afflicted him as well, or is it better to say what we know verifiably and what we do not know, and to avoid conclusions that are not necessarily valid? This is a small example of my underlying approach; I think it is best to go absolutely as far as we can go, but to be prudent about never present what is unknowable as factual. My vision of Mondrian stems from an incredible love of his painting, so strong that it has been for over six decades a mainstay of my own life, and at the same time a persistent wish to avoid the pitfalls that occur when one wants pat statements and sweeping explanations when none pertain.

Of course, I have come in, many people will say, from the outside. Not only am I not from the Netherlands—while the aspect of Mondrian's life on which I focus in this thesis is his years in his native country—but I do not speak Dutch. Yet, oddly enough, I feel as if I come from Mondrian's world. His abstract art is so universal, its influence so vast, that anyone who has ever seen one of his late compositions first hand, or looked at a building façade in any modern city, feels that Mondrian speaks the same language. Yet, clearly, my inability to read Dutch would have been an impediment to my research had I not, from the start, recognized that I needed a competent scholar willing to work with me intensely, reading every possible text by the artist, newspaper article, interview, or book that might advance my goal of coming as close as possible to my subject. I am lucky enough to have found the right person, Willem van Roij, who has worked with me from the start. I was also lucky to work with a superb translator, Ina Rilke, so that every Dutch source became accessible to me and no nuance of Mondrian's sometimes elusive way of expressing himself is lost on me.

I have worked in the mode described by Nigel Hamilton in his 'Biography as corrective,' in which Hamilton writes that, of a turning point in his career,

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[1] Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian. Life and Work*, Harry N. Abrams, New York; Contact, Amsterdam 1956; Hans Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan. Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven. Een biografie*, Hollands Diep, Amsterdam 2016; Léon Hanssen, *De schepping van een aards paradijs. Piet Mondriaan 1919-1933*, Em. Querido's Uitgeverij BV, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2015.

'I therefore began quite consciously to see my research and my biography as a chance not simply to retell one individual's life and career, but to correct bad, highly influential historianship.'[2] This is consistent with what Hamilton admires in "Suetonius and Plutarch, who came to see their mission as contesting the popular myths and received opinions of their time, and subjecting them to diligent biographical examination."[3] Hamilton follows that comment with reference to Lytton Strachey's *Eminent Victorians*, a book I have greatly admired since my student days, and which in form was, at least initially, the model for the five-person biography I initially called *Eminent Moderns*, although my editor at Alfred A. Knopf, its publisher, subsequently persuaded me to rename it *Patron Saints*.[4] (I concurred, but then regretted the new title when I saw the book on the shelves designated for the subject of "Religion" in several book stores.)

In fact, my role model is, in all my writing, even more than *Eminent Moderns*, Strachey's *Queen Victoria*.[5] That book attracted me from the start for its lucidity, its novelistic élan, and its ability to make a complex individual alive to the reader. In writing about the years of Mondrian's life from his birth in 1872 until that move from his homeland in 1919, I have tried to get inside an under-examined time period, one where intense uncertainty, even confusion, led to his needing to make a substantial change when he moved to Paris, a second time—having lived there from January 1912 to the summer of 1914, but then spent the years of wartime in Holland—and made it the city where he lived longer than any other. For while I maintain that there is an underlying consistency in Mondrian's artistic passions and the resultant painting, I also feel that 1919 was a crucial moment, a chance to eradicate the past, to put a lot that was unsettling behind him, and to turn to 'Neo-Plasticism' as a source of unprecedented ballast while he created a personal haven that made no reference to family, Holland, ornament, or anything else troubling. I hope I have come close to Strachey's model of zeroing in on the essential elements of a human being who presented himself in various ways, not just to the outside world but also in his self-regard.

Patron Saints was a book that stayed on the surface, in such a way that one critic criticized me for not addressing the issue of the sexuality of the subjects, and another critic—both for major American newspapers—praised me for keeping their sexuality private. (one of my subjects was still alive at the time of publication) My next biography, a monograph on *Balthus*,

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[2] Nigel Hamilton, 'Biography as corrective', in: Hans Renders, Binne de Haan, Jonne Harmsma (ed.), *The Biographical Turn. Lives in history*, Routledge, London and New York 2017, p. 24.
[3] Hamilton, *Biography as corrective*, p. 27.
[4] Lytton Strachey, *Eminent Victorians*, Chatto & Windus, London 1918; Nicholas Fox Weber, *Patron Saints. Five Rebels Who Openend America to a New Art 1928-1943*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1992.
[5] Lytton Strachey, *Queen Victoria*, Chatto & Windus, London 1921.

is written in the first person, which was the only way I could honestly address the complexities of a man who lied to me repeatedly, who played games with everyone, and whom I personally liked, enormously, in spite of his qualities that others found heinous.[6] Because I had gone to stay with my subject, and because I had so many personal encounters relating to him, some very bizarre, I saw no other way to approach him. Critical response ranged from the book being called, by the former chief art critic of *The New York Times*, a "valentine" to my subject, to its being attacked as too candid about his chicanery, to its being condemned as insufficiently judgemental of what some critics insisted was his "pedophilia" and my sinfulness in allowing my young daughters to meet him, to its being applauded as reading like a "romain policier" (the French edition) and a cat-and-mouse thriller. I wrote it the only way I could address the subject of the man who denied his Jewishness, told me he was a descendent of Lord Byron and also of the Romanovs, and invented a title for himself which he insisted on having others use for him. I then wrote a biography of Le Corbusier in which I happily kept myself off the stage, as I did in a book called *The Clarks of Cooperstown*, because there was no need for me to enter in.[7] Rather, I tried to tell the stories of my subjects in accord with their achievements, and to bring to light some colourful, unusual lives. All were published by the same editor at Knopf, who supported my varying approaches. A subsequent book about six of the leading figures of the Bauhaus again included some text in the first person, wince I knew two of my subjects well.[8] That is to say, the subject dictates the approach. And with this book on the pre-abstraction years of Piet Mondrian, I have, again, let the subject determine my method of presentation. My effort is both to illuminate his wonderful art and its relationship to its maker, and so, above all else, I have tried to guide my readers through some utterly wonderful pictures and to present whatever can be discerned about the man who made them.

What made Mondrian tick? I have tried to relate the personal life of Mondrian to his public feats. The biographer must demonstrate that someone's personal background has influenced his public achievements. That is even the main argument for choosing 'biography' as a genre. The subject's private life should be used to explain and provide context for what is public.[9] In the case of Mondrian, I hope to have made it clear that his

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[6] Nicholas Fox Weber, *Balthus. A Biography*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1999.

[7] Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier. A Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2008; Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Clarks of Cooperstown. Their Singer Sewing Machine Fortune, Their Great and Influential Art Collections, Their Forty-Year Feud*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2007.

[8] Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Bauhaus Group. Six Modern Masters of Modernism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009.

[9] Hans Renders, 'Roots of Biography: From Journalism to Pulp to Scholarly Based Non-Fiction', in: *Theoretical Discussions of Biography. Approaches*

interest and knowledge of theosophy has left traces in his visual work and the choices he has made in it. His apprehensions about aspects of the natural world eventually inspired him to abandon the wish to represent it, and, in fact, to avoid it entirely, but it is only by understanding his absorption in nature when he was young that we truly grasp his insistent dismissal of it later. His passion for dance steps, their rhythm and measure and form, had a direct impact on some of the paintings he would name for them. His notion of a level of human spiritual perfection would inspire him to try to show it in paintings of people with the innocence and virtue he considered possible. Everything within the man would become manifest in the art for which he lived, with an exclusivity rare even for other great painters in all of art history.

In Tolstoy's *War and Peace* the private world (peace) and the public world (war) first run along parallel lines, now they intersect; Prince André participates in the battle of Austerlitz, Pierre at Borodino. Thus Tolstoy proceeded along that path that had been splendidly opened up to him by Stendhal with his description of the battle of Waterloo seen through the eyes of Fabrizio del Dongo.

The biographer is required to provide a narrative of the transformation of the private individual into a public figure.[10] Or: the biographer is required to provide the artist with a personal narrative, so that we can better understand the incubation of his artistic ideas. I do not claim to know the inner-workings of Piet Mondrian's mind, but I have heard and read a sufficient number of first-hand accounts, and I have been so attentive to everything the artist himself said, which has been surprisingly ignored by all the pundits with their axes to grind, that I am willing to say to you, my readers, that, if you want to know Mondrian to the extent that he can be known, with the perpetual awareness that we know less about other people, and even ourselves, than we assume, you will understand the aim of this book. And to achieve that purpose, I have sometimes depended on sources outside the mainstream. Above all, I have found a wealth of information and insight in an unpublished first-hand account on Mondrian's year in Brabant, from 1903 to 1904, written by his closest friend, Albert van den Briel, a forester, who got him to that rural retreat and saw him constantly when they were both there, and had dinner together at least twice a week, and sometimes every night.[11] There are two versions of this narrative, the

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from History, Microhistory and Life Writing, Brill Publishers, Leiden-Boston 2014, p. 24-42.

[10] François Dosse, *Le pari Biographique. Écrire une vie*, Éditions la Découverte, Paris 2005, p. 346–354.

[11] Albert van den Briel, 'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid', manuscript (RKD - Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Den Haag, Archief Robert Welsh, 0632). It has never been published in its entirity, but parts (about a fifth) of the manuscript have been published in: Herbert Henkels, *'t is alles een groote eenheid, Bert. Piet Mondriaan, Albert van den Briel en hun vriendschap*

second written because Van den Briel thought the first was lost, and I place great value on the differences between them, and on Van den Briel's obvious motivations for changing his story.[12] I also value, immensely, the letters written by Mondrian's brother, Carel, and his only nephew, son of his brother Willem, to Harry Holtzman, in the years just after Mondrian's death. These letters, in Holtzman's papers, now at the Beinecke Library at Yale University, are a small goldmine.[13] And I have been lucky enough to have conversations with insightful individuals who knew Mondrian rather well, directly; while I know that what any human being says about any other is subjective, I consider myself fortunate in being among the few people to have had the luxury of discussions with various people, old enough to have been my grandparent, who relished the chance to tell me about this artist they admire deeply and whose work I, half a century younger than they were, clearly adored.

What has happened in the case of Mondrian—that a lot of folderol has been published about him and his work—is not unusual. I would rather not name some of the people I consider offenders—an influential art historian who considers Mondrian an exemplar of the personality type now called "highly sensitive," even my own former professor, the renowned Meyer Schapiro, whose text on Mondrian is written in such obtuse language that few people can honestly say they have read every word of it—but there are numerous narratives that, whether correct or unsound, are simply impenetrable.[14]

There is also the case of the error which in effect became a form of character assassination, the misinformation that first appeared in the Volume I of the Mondrian catalogue raisonné and was then repeated in the catalogue of the recent Mondrian exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2010 stating that Mondrian did not attend his mother's funeral. For several years after beginning my research, I believed that my subject was so emotionally detached that he failed to make the short trip from Amsterdam to Arnhem for the funeral of the woman who had been devoted to the family, with no evidence of strife. Then I found, in a letter that Carel Mondrian wrote Harry Holtzman, in response to Holtzman's asking for the

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aan de hand van brieven, documenten en fragmenten bezorgd en van een nawoord voorzien door Herbert Henkels, Joh. Enschedé en zonen, Haarlem 1988, p. 43-58.

[12] According to Henkels, the first manuscript had originally been written for J.M. Harthoorn (a collector) in the 1960's. Subsequently, Van den Briel made it available for the scholar Robert Welsh. The second version would be the one Van den Briel made especially for Welsh in 1967. See Henkels, *Groote eenheid*, p. 43.

[13] Harry Holtzman Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

[14] Meyer Schapiro, *Mondrian: On the Humanity of Abstract Painting*, George Braziller, New York 1995.

year when Mondrian went to Paris, that it could not have been before 1910, because he remembered Piet being at their mother's funeral at the end of 1909.[15] I consider it the task of a biographer to set the record straight about details which significantly effect the perception of one's subject.

I had the good fortune, in the years when I was going full steam under the guidance of the American art history establishment—as a student of Rudolf Wittkower as well as Schapiro at Columbia College, where I earned my B.A., and as a teaching assistant to Vincent Scully, at Yale, where I also studied with Robert Herbert and other recognized "authorities," and where I got my M.A.—to meet Josef and Anni Albers. Their message was loud and clear. The realities of an artist are hardly ever as presented by art historians. The literature on the Bauhaus, and Black Mountain College, two institutions where they were pivotal figures, was largely erroneous and misleading. So my book on Mondrian is not an art historical study, but a biography with the focus on his life in relation to the development of his work.

The same Josef Albers fondly recalled conversations with Piet Mondrian, and their mutual art dealer—Sidney Janis—also spoke to me about this Dutch artist whose work had changed my life ever since I was ten years old. I loved what both Albers and Janis told me—about a celebrant of existence and a serious craftsman who was concerned with practicality. This is part of what Nigel Hamilton calls the "history" of this biography: my awareness that the man who painted *The Red Cloud*, a 1909 canvas by Mondrian that bowled me over when I first saw it as a college student, and *Broadway Boogie-Woogie*, was an accessible human being.[16] He was straightforward and pragmatic: Josef recalled a discussion they had about how and when to use electrical tape. Sidney depicted Mondrian as fun-loving: the artist and collector often went to Roseland Dance Hall together, where, Janis told me with a wicked smile, they cared only about tango technique and the women teaching it to them. He was also kind; Sidney Janis's son, Carroll, still a friend of mine, had enough memories of Mondrian going back to Carroll's own earliest years that they present a valuable portrait of the man. Throughout this book, I do my utmost to use such sources, while deliberately avoiding imposing ideas that come from left field, and, on occasion, exposing them, because they have had disproportionate, misleading influence on public perception.

These misrepresentations, or unjust portrayals, of Mondrian parallel the approach of myriad biographers and critics about a vast range of subjects.

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[15] This error has recently been corrected by Hans Janssen in his *Piet Mondriaan. Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven. Een biografie*, Hollands Diep, Amsterdam 2016.

[16] 'Commander in Chief. Genesis, Process, Outcome', in: Nigel Hamilton, *Commander in chief: FDR's battle with Churchill, 1943*, University of Groningen, Groningen 2016, p. 533.

So many pages, so many tomes, not just about Mondrian but about numerous other creative geniuses, depend on unjustifiable conclusions. Please forgive my negativity, but you need to know that, in daring to write about a consummate genius who was in his private life, the way he designed and arranged his Parisian apartment is an illustration of it, and own work so vibrant and so refined, and who embraced the necessity of care and discipline to achieve unprecedented beauty, I cannot claim that I completely eschew anything unverifiable, but when I am voicing an opinion or theory that cannot be proven, I make it clear that I am doing so. My goal, after all, is, above everything else, to enhance our understanding of Mondrian's work, and to feel the incredible pleasure it provides. My perpetual quest is the elucidation of Mondrian's qualities that enhance the pleasure of his stupendous painting. Nigel Hamilton nails the point, not just in what he says but in how he articulates it. Only say what matters; only say what is certain; and realize that there is a history for the writer's approach.

My personal favorites of all biographies are Henri Troyat's *Tolstoy*, because it is written in straightforward prose and tells the story with the passion of one of his subject's masterpieces, and Garson Kanin's *Remembering Mr. Maugham*, a glorious compendium of personal reflections about Somerset Maugham, written with the grace and sense of nuance that define Maugham's own genius, and made all the richer by the introduction by Noël Coward, whose worldliness and panache are akin to those of Maugham's own personages.[17] These books have the qualities that were vital to their subjects; they are lucid, engaging, and informed by intelligence and subtlety. They are entirely different in nature, but I consider it the obligation of a biography to have the character of its subject's greatest achievements. And, so, part of the concept behind this volume on Mondrian is to keep it engaging, positive-spirited, celebrative of the splendors of life, and unflinchingly honest.

In this thesis on Piet Mondrian, I try to do what my subject did, to research his principles, his style, and his genius, similarly. This is what Troyat did for Tolstoy; his biography, almost as long as *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, keeps you excited and maintains your engagement, by making you privy to human passion, as those novels do. It is what Kanin did with Maugham, through his legerdemain, his candor, his understanding, even enjoyment, of what others would consider to be human frailties. In this thesis on Piet Mondrian, I know I have not matched Mondrian's brilliance, his clarity, his lack of ego, his dismissal of his self and his own needs in favour of higher goals, the exquisite art with which every line is perfect, and could not be a centimetre longer or shorter, and every color accorded just

[17] Henri Troyat, *Tolstoï*, Fayard, Paris 1965 (translated by Nancy Amphoux, Dell, 1971); Garson Kanin, *Remembering Mr. Maugham*, Bantam, New York 1973.

the right tone and quantity, but it is my ambition to do my utmost, at least, to honor my subject's approach and standards.

Forgive me if I say what I do *not* want to do—any more than Piet Mondrian wanted to paint "the tragic" in life, any more than he wanted to focus on his self rather than the universe he considered so infinitely beautiful, so much more interesting than his own, personal, everyday ups and downs. I do not want to do the equivalent of Blake Bailey's biography of John Cheever, which, for all the praise it received, repeated to the point of tedium the same tales of alcoholism and homosexuality, never looking at their sources so much as giving one example after another ad infinitum, violating the elegance and subtlety of Cheever's own writing.[18] Nor do I want to be the equivalent of Franz Schulze writing about Philip Johnson, even though Schulze depended on me as a source.[19] I was the person, because of research I was doing for my book *Patron Saints*, who found a letter in which Johnson wrote Alfred Barr, from Berlin, in 1933, saying that Hitler had a lot of good ideas.[20] I was glad to send a copy to Schulze, who used it judiciously. But for me the problem with Schulze's book is that he presents hundreds of pages focused on Philip Johnson in a dry, slightly academic manner; I find it impossible to consider someone who was so much like Oscar Wilde, in his wit and irreverence, his insistence on style and surface at all costs, as Philip Johnson was (I knew the architect well) and to write about him with dead earnestness and neither the cosmopolitanism or the levity that were Johnson's essence.

Some personal history is relevant to this dissertation. When I was ten years old, a painting by my mother, a watercolor of a dead pheasant, won an honourable mention in an exhibition of the Connecticut Watercolor Society held at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the oldest public art museum in America, a treasure house of great art ranging from 17th century American furniture to Italian Baroque painting (a Caravaggio) to masterpieces by Picasso, Miró, and other modernists, art acquired by the intrepid director A. Everett Austin Jr., when the paint was still fresh. I was restless at the exhibition opening, shorter than the crowd of adults, feeling crushed, detesting the crustless tea sandwiches as if they represented a mushiness I found loathsome in any domain. I asked my father if I could wander up the white plaster spiral staircase that rose from the ground floor gallery where my mother's work was on view. Fifteen minutes later I reappeared downstairs, and implored my father to come to what in the US we call "the third floor"—two flights up—with me. He did. I explained that there was a painting I loved as much

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[18] Blake Bailey, *Cheever: a life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009.
[19] Franz Schulze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1994.
[20] Nicholas Fox Weber, *Patron Saints. Five Rebels Who Opened America to a New Art 1928-1943*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1992.

as I loved the mountain tops to which I hiked in the summers, and skiing: my two passions. Looking at the simple compendium of black vertical and horizontal lines on a white background, one pure blue rectangle, way off center, being the only other element, my father said, "Very good, Nicky. That is a painting by an artist called Mondrian. Mommy and I have a book about him at home if you want to see more."

Of course, it is my own family story—about a father who was brought up by a poor glasscutter who probably had never been inside a museum, and who became sufficiently sophisticated so that, in 1958, when my friends' fathers would have said that any child could do such a painting, he knew the artist and loved his work; a printer, my father revered clean graphic design. It is also the story of love without knowledge—one of the greatest luxuries of youth. That I experienced complete ecstasy and a profound sense of well-being in front of an abstract artist whose name or history meant nothing to me is, in fact, the birth of this book.

Then, a bit over ten years ago, I was having a conversation with Sir Nicholas Serota, then Director of Tate, a friend as well as an attentive reader of my biographies of Balthus and Le Corbusier. I asked him who remained among the masters of the twentieth century about whom no biography had been written. He named Léger and Mondrian. I like Léger's work a lot—I am only interested in writing about artists whose work offers much to admire—but Mondrian's name was magic to hear. Between the ages of sixty and seventy I might return to some of the values that made me euphoric at the age of ten, and now try to understand them, and their creator better.

Sidney Janis (1896-1989), a renowned art dealer by the time I met him, once told me that Piet Mondrian (1872-1944) was "the greatest artist of the twentieth century." Since Janis was a friend of Picasso's, and represented Brancusi and Giacometti and other modern masters, that evaluation surprised me, in spite of my own deep-seated admiration for Mondrian's work. This book undertakes, and finally justifies, Janis's claim, through a close look at his early years, the period that still remains the least explored in Mondrian's life.

Mondrian grew up in a religious family in Amersfoort and Winterswijk; his arch-Calvinist father, a schoolmaster, espoused views that eventually became seminal to America's Religious Right. He moved to Amsterdam to study at the Rijksakademie and, although purportedly a traditional academic painter, showed his independence and intensity from the start. He soon became a pioneering modernist, breaking the boundaries of color and composition. In 1912, he moved to Paris, where he painted his own version of Cubism. During the First World War, back in the Netherlands, he began to paint more abstractly, became friendly with the artists who developed *De Stijl*, and became a serious ballroom dancer (the passion he later shared with Sidney Janis). In 1919, Mondrian returned to Paris, never again to go back to the Netherlands.

Who was this unique individual who seemed to live only to paint and write in order to promulgate pure abstraction as the salvation for humankind? What was the impact of his childhood as the eldest son of Johanna Christina de Kok (1839-1909), from a mercantile family, and Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan Sr. (1839-1921)? Mondriaan, Sr. was a dour theologian, unwavering in his conservatism and belief that church and state should be one, but I believe that his reputation as an irascible tyrant in all the literature to date leaves out the extent of the support he offered his namesake.

I also consider the impact of Mondrian's Uncle Frits, a successful painter in the style of the widely-accepted Hague School. Frits forced his nephew to drop the second "a" of their shared last name so that the public who lined up to buy Frits's work would not confuse him with the younger Mondriaan who painted wild yellow skies and pink windmills. (Here, too, I refute the usual Mondrian mythology that attributes the name change to the artist's move to Paris.)

This detailed overview of the years from Mondrian's birth until the artist's return to Paris after the first world war explores the human relationships, including a broken engagement to marry, and sheds new light on the artist's everyday life. It also pays a new level of attention to Mondrian's writing, most especially a play he wrote for three characters, to increase our understanding of the rare homogeny and cohesiveness of the artist's deliberate solitude, his artwork, and the personal philosophy he developed and then applied to an exceptional extent to every aspect of his existence.

Many books about Piet Mondrian have been published since the artist's death in 1944. Yet there is still a lacuna. The 1956 book on Mondrian by his friend and admirer Michel Seuphor codified incorrect information and created a false image of the artist that have until now had a lasting effect. (When Nicholas Serota suggested that I should write this book, he told me that Seuphor's tome, "the bible on Mondrian, is full of mistakes," and that he counted on me to correct them.) The 1998 *Catalogue Raisonné* by Joosten and Welsh is indispensable for Mondrian research, but it, too, created errors about Mondrian's life that have been repeated since.[21] On the other hand, Carel Blotkamp's *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* is a source of enormous value, rich in information and in interpretation of the work, but it is not a biography.[22] *De schepping van een aards paradijs. Piet Mondriaan 1919-1933* (2015) by Léon Hanssen is accurate, but focuses on Mondrian's later years.

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[21] Robert P. Welsh; Joop M. Joosten, *Piet Mondrian. Catalogue Raisonné*. I: Robert P. Welsh, Catalogue Raisonné of the Naturalistic Works (until early 1911). II: Joop M. Joosten, Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911-1944. III: Joop M. Joosten, Robert P. Welsh, Appendix (3 dln [in 2 bnd.], V + K Publishing, Blaricum; Inmerc, Paris: Cercle d'Art, 1998.

[22] Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction*, Reaktion Books, London 2001. (First published as *Mondriaan. Destructie als kunst*, Waanders, Zwolle 1994.)

And I question Hanssen's general thesis of the artist as a modern hermit. An idea that goes back to *Les évasions d'Olivier Trickmansholm*, a 1939 novel by Mondrian's friend Seuphor.[23] In Seuphor's work of fiction, Mondrian is pictured with the name Marc Eentzam—eenzaam meaning lonely and solitary in Dutch. In avant-garde Paris, Eentzam lives like a hermit, immersed in mysticism.

The biography *Piet Mondriaan. Een nieuwe kunst voor een ongekend leven* (2016) by Hans Janssen, chief curator of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, gives an opposite image of Mondrian—as a playboy and lover of scores of women. A debate between Hanssen and Janssen has ensued. Hanssen feels that Janssen has acted like someone on a public relations campaign, trying to add value to his museum's collection of Mondrian's early work by portraying their creator as a mix of wild man and bon-vivant.[24] Both of these writers alternately validate and refute the images of Mondrian already created by Seuphor, Harry Holtzman, and Geoffrey Hellman, who wrote a profile of Mondrian for *The New Yorker*.[25] In this last case, when writing my biography of Le Corbusier, I encountered Hellman because of Corbu's outrage at the writer's two-part profile of him, so rife with inaccuracies that Corbu demanded a printed correction, and, when he did not get one, threatened a lawsuit. I consider all of the different point of views, doing my best to achieve truthfulness, balancing fiction with facts, and adding as much new information as I have been able to find and validate.

My book, which I happily submit as a PhD thesis from the University of Groningen, has been thoroughly researched through letters, interviews, and the archives that exist in the Netherlands, France, and the U.S. I deliberately avoid a single doctrine or opinion but, rather, do my best to provide new insights at the same time that I acknowledge the mysteries Mondrian carefully guarded. While presenting Mondrian's first forty-seven years in the context of the artist's surroundings and the pertinent shifts in European culture that impacted him—including the growth of Theosophy, political anarchism, the development of modern music, the building of new museums, and both the support of and opposition to radical ideas about art and architecture—I will demonstrate that, regardless of his many contacts with members of the avant-garde, Mondrian always chose his own singular path. The artist, to an unequalled extent, made the creation of an art that was universal, and unrelated to epoch or location or individuality, the singular goal of his life. The work Mondrian made in the years before he left

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[23] Michel Seuphor, *Les évasions d'Olivier Trickmansholm*, Fernard Aubier, Paris 1939.
[24] Léon Hanssen, 'Het Glaspaleis', in: *Alleen een wonder kan je dragen. Over het sublieme bij Mondriaan*, Huis Clos, Rimburg/Amsterdam 2017, p. 27-61.
[25] Geoffrey T. Hellman, 'Lines and Rectangles', in: *The New Yorker* 17(1941)3, p. 8-10.

the Netherlands forever, and the various ways he lived, whether isolated in the countryside or in the midst of Amsterdam and Laren, is fertile territory, and has been a thrill to explore. It has brought me right back to the thrill of that ten-year-old who had the pleasure of feeling life's difficulties temporarily evaporate, and a consummate joy replace them.

Preface

When I was ten years old, my mother, a painter, received an Honorable Mention in an exhibition of the Connecticut Watercolor Society held at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in Hartford. Her prize was for a painting of a dead pheasant which she had kept in her studio, unplucked, for a few days after my father shot it in fields not far from our house.

My parents adored one another, and the grace with which my mother depicted the dead bird, which would be plucked the day after she made the picture in a medium that enabled her to paint quickly, and which she would then transform into a superb dinner, reflected the happy life of the household.

My older sister and I attended the exhibition opening. After a few minutes which seemed interminable, I couldn't wait to get out of there. I needed to escape the sea of grown-ups, all larger than me, babbling away while looking at what for the most part were rather traditional, academic watercolors as they ate squishy, crustless tea sandwiches, which I abhorred. The softness and lack of crusts made them suitable only for old ladies; I longed for crunch and texture, and action. I saw the curved white staircase that leads to the Atheneum's permanent collection and asked my father if I could skadoodle.

About fifteen minutes later I went running down, grabbed my father by the arm, and said, "Daddy, there is something upstairs I like as much as I like mountain tops and skiing! You have to come up."

He followed me, and I led him to a luminous canvas with a pure white background and a grid of black horizontal and vertical lines which contained, on the right-hand side, a single rectangle of brilliant blue. Looking at it the second time overjoyed me even more than the first.

"Very good, Nicky. That is by a man called Mondrian. He was a fine artist, and Mommy and I have a book of his work at home if you want to look at it."

We went downstairs together, and I felt charged with energy by my discovery of new and fantastic territory.

I consider my father the hero of the story. He had grown up in a household where there was no interest whatsoever in art or design, where religion and financial survival were about all that mattered. Moreover, in the era when I felt transformed by that late Mondrian, almost every single one of my friends' fathers would have called the painting "nonsense" and probably have said, "Oh come one, you could have painted that yourself'" or even cuffed his son for liking something so ridiculous. But my father, who was in the printing business, had a particular regard for Mondrian, whose work had such an impact on graphic design. And from my mother he had acquired respect for the courage of artists to lead their lives

independently and without the usual expectations of domesticity and fortune.

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I eventually learned that *Composition in Blue and White*, the 1934/35 canvas that injected me with such a sense of thrill, was the first abstract Mondrian even to enter an American public collection.[26] The Atheneum's intrepid curator, Chick Austin, had bought it from Mondrian in Paris for 6000 francs, the equivalent of 4400 euro nowadays.[27] Although Mondrian had lived in Paris for over twenty years, no French museum had acquired his work, or would do so during his lifetime; Austin had some of Mondrian's same temerity.

But the facts only came later. What came first was the feeling I had, when looking at this painting, not only that everything was right in the world, but that life offered forms of excitement beyond my imagining.

I am convinced that Mondrian's unique art is so beautiful and uplifting that its maker's life story matters to people in a range of locations. As someone who knows or knew people who were first hand acquaintances of Mondrian, and who has had privileged access to almost every last scrap of information about the painter, I feel a strong obligation to get his story right, which means correcting errors that have already come to create his myth. One of the fallacies that suits any number of observers because it fits into a package of self-invention is that Mondrian took the second "a" out of his name in 1912 as part of the embrace of streamlined modernism that inspired him to move to Paris. In fact, he changed his name at the insistence of his disapproving uncle Frits, a traditional painter who could not bear his own work being confused with that of the nephew whose radical style appaled him. Beyond that, with the excitement of seeing a first grandchild start his lifetime as I approach the end of my own, I want for him what I desire for everyone: the chance to feel a myriad of pleasures and savor the rich fortune of earthly existence as long as one has freedom and health and life's necessities. This is Mondrian's salient meaning for the world. Let beauty get inside you! Exalt in sheer joy! Take risks, do it your own way, in order to taste the wonder of seeing. Understanding is secondary to emotion. Know that blue and white, and rhythm, pure miracles.

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[26] B258 *Composition (No. IV) Blanc-Blue*, 1934/1935, Hartford, Wadsworth Atheneum.

[27] Historical currency converter used from Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques. (https://www.insee.fr/fr/information)

23, rue du Départ

I

Paris, September 8, 1926.
The correspondent for *De Telegraaf*, a major national newspaper known for its strong art section at that time, anticipated that the studio of one of his country's best-known living painters would be a cross between a laboratory and a monk's cell.[28] He knew that Piet Mondrian lived where he worked, and was a recluse, albeit a friendly and agreeable one. Even while inhabiting one of the busiest and noisiest neighborhoods in Paris, being a regular in his chosen cafés and dance halls, and attending lots of other artists' openings, Mondrian famously isolated himself when he repaired to his lair. He led a solitary existence, keeping his surroundings modest and simple, and eliminated disturbances in order to concentrate on his painting and writing.

Mondrian was not averse to publicity, however. The journalist had read accounts by several other writers who had visited the artist previously. He already knew that it was basically a large room with high white walls on which the fifty-four-year-old abstract artist had hung small panels of vibrant primary colors that he regularly moved around. One day Mondrian would raise a small yellow square by five centimeters; the following afternoon he would edge a larger blue vertical rectangle ever-so-slightly sideways. Each variation would alter the beat and change the rhythm of the entire space.

Nothing, however, had prepared the eager journalist for the shock of these living quarters inhabited by the man who declared "'Art" must be forgotten: beauty must be realized.'[29]

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In true Dutch Protestant tradition, the journalist remained anonymous and genderless, using "our special correspondent" as the byline for this interview with Mondrian, but we know that it was W.F.A. Röell.[30] The

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[28] The strong art section consisted of, among others, Max Tak, Sem Dresden and Kasper Niehaus. See Mariëtte Wolf, *Het geheim van De Telegraaf. Geschiedenis van een krant*, Boom, Amsterdam 2009, p. 179-181.

[29] Letter (in English) Piet Mondrian to László Moholy-Nagy, June 6 1939, as quoted in: Harry Holtzman; Martin S. James, *The New Art – The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Thames and Hudson, London 1987, p. 310.

[30] We know it was W.F.A. Röell, a graduated engineer who became an important art critic, writing and living in Paris. When the "special correspondent" refers to his own math study, it corresponds to the career of Röell. The writer also refers to previous visits to Mondrian and we know from a letter from Mondrian to Van Doesburg (June 1 1920) that Röell had been at Mondrian's studio before. The report of that visit had been published in *Het*

modest writer had no problem subsuming his own persona to the overwhelming impact of his interviewee. The studio, even more than the agreeable and unassuming man who made his groundbreaking abstract compositions in it and lived there as well, wowed him.

Röell was struck first by 'the squalid yard behind the clamor of the Gare Montparnasse' where one entered the 'dingy staircase' which led to Mondrian's door on the third floor. The sound of clanking trains arriving from the Paris suburbs or announcing their imminent departure for Bordeaux with loud whistles had now subsided. He anticipated a surprise as the door opened, but this was not the one he imagined. Röell was enjoying a refreshing calm as the hustle and bustle behind him faded and the clean-cut artist in workman's overalls greeted him amiably. Then he entered a milieu that took him by storm. 'What a contrast! No Thousand-and-One Nights here, opening up a treasure-filled cave to the poor camel driver. Instead of riches, this lonely ascetic offers a dazzling purity, causing everything to be bathed in a pristine glow.'[31]

While the journalist caught his breath after walking up the dilapidated stairs and Mondrian opened the shabby wooden door to the white cavern with its panels of bold color vibrating from unexpected locations, the impression of sheer originality staggered him. Poetry and toughness were combined in a form that existed nowhere else in the world.

Some of Mondrian's recent paintings, either just completed or still in progress, hung on the walls amidst the geometric units of primary colors. Others stood on the floor, leaning against the wall, and two were propped on easels. All of them had straight but clearly handmade black lines and rectangles of red, yellow, or blue—either singly or in combination—atop the backgrounds that at first glance seemed the same white but then revealed itself to be as many as three subtly different whites on a single canvas. Like the music of Mozart or the latest jazz, these lean yet plentiful oils on canvas flowed ceaselessly. Mondrian used color like a magic potion, and fine-tuned his black lines and their intersections to animate space and create a deliberate, balanced frenzy. The bravura of the art and of the arrangements of pulsing colors penetrated the viewer.

Mondrian's vibrant geometry and way of invigorating flat surfaces had in the past few years started to be echoed on building façades and in graphic

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Vaderland, July 9, 1920. In that article from 1920, Röell compares the Mondrian studio with that of Van Dongen. In this *Telegraaf* article, the writer also makes a comparison with the Van Dongen studio, in a manner reminiscent of the comments made by Röell earlier in 1920. Cf. Léon Hanssen, *De Schepping van een aards paradijs. Piet Mondriaan 1919-1933*, Em. Querido Uitgeverij BV, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2015, p. 84.

[31] 'Bij Piet Mondriaan. Het kristalklare atelier – Apologie van den Charleston', in: *De Telegraaf* September 12 1926, as translated in: Herbert Henkels, *Mondrian. From Figuration to Abstraction*, The Tokyo Shimbun, Tokyo 1987, p. 30.

layout all over Europe. Here in Paris, as well as in the artist's native Netherlands, there were other painters who imitated him.[32] Even in more distant locations, this radical, right-angled modernism was making its mark. But in the studio the art was intimate, a process more than an end result. It was simply part and parcel of the life of the affable, unpretentious man who made it.

While Röell knew Mondrian's work in general and recognized its international impact, he had not imagined the direct effect of the ardor with which Mondrian lived. The studio had a redolent quietude, like a Romanesque cloister, yet at the same time, it transmitted decisiveness and certainty. Every stick of furniture, the colors with which each panel had been painted, the few books and ashtrays and utensils, the absence of anything else, were without compromise. Other artists and designers and patrons of the époque lived in related styles, but no one else had the rigor, the mix of finesse and roughness, the flair to make plywood more elegant than travertine. And the paintings, while as ethereal as clouds, emitted an extraordinary force. Here was power made friendly and welcoming. They were playful and joyous, while clearly the products of refinement and discipline. The embodied spirituality, their aura of ecstacy all the more plausible for being rooted in logic.

#

The journalist's experience passing through the entrance way after Mondrian opened the door, and arriving in the two-story high studio, boggled his mind. He had first entered a vestibule where the awkward arrangement of furniture and division of space suited only the needs of the inhabitant; Mondrian clearly had no regard for the experience of visitors. An off-white rough cotton curtain cut most of the horizontal vestibule into two narrow halves, each the width of a corridor. The curtain shielded a private domain that any outsider, unless he had no regard for privacy and was a merciless snoop, would instinctively avoid while proceeding to the right of the door in the direction of a small stair hall. But Mondrian had decided that there would be no secrets for the journalist from the city where he had spent his formative years. Without saying anything, Mondrian pulled the curtain aside 'to reveal a gas-ring, sauce pans' and a bed.[33] The artist had

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[32] In the Netherlands, César Domela and Willem van Leusden were among them. Cf. Geurt Imanse, 'De jaren 1915-1918: Het ontstaan van De Branding en De Stijl', in: Geurt Imanse [a.o.], *Van Gogh tot Cobra. Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1950*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, Amsterdam 1982, p. 175-176.

[33] This comes from an earlier article, Henry van Loon, 'Bij Piet Mondriaan', in: *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* 23 maart 1922, as translated in: Herbert Henkels, *Mondrian. From Figuration to Abstraction*, The Tokyo Shimbun, Tokyo 1987, p. 26. As a biographer, I take the liberty of assuming that Mondrian showed his studio in a similar manner to *De Telegraaf* correspondent.

only opened the hanging fabric slighhtly, providing nothing more than a quick peep, but the silent communication was clear: "This is all it takes for me to live."

Röell left out the detail that, above the single cot, there was a scattering of about a dozen photographs of a smiling Josephine Baker.[34] In some, she stood, elegantly dressed and neatly coiffed, with regal bearing. But in the photos nearer to the pillow at the head of the bed, on the far end from where Mondrian had opened the curtain, and therefore almost out of sight, Baker posed with complete abandon and seductiveness, wildly dancing, or squatting with gymnastic ease. In two, she threw her head back gleefully. On the long wall that met the short ones with these pictures of the beguiling Baker, there hung more white draperies, with a small unframed rectangular mirror pressed into the middle of them so that they billowed around it. The curtains, parallel to the hanging material Mondrian had opened, looked as if they had space behind them, as if the enclosure was a free-standing tent, but in fact they were directly against the wall, covering nothing but plaster. There was no apparent reason for them to be there except as a primitive sort of interior decoration that turned the space containing the bed into a boudoir with room for only one person.

To the left after one comes through the entrance door was a two-burner cooker that sat on a bare-bones wooden table painted the same white as everything else. This and some cabinets was all there was to the kitchen, but it was adequate for Mondrian to prepare his usual lentils or whatever his latest diet called for.

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It was only after being initially destabilized at first by all these unexpected sights that Röell had gone up five steps and emerged in the double-height studio space that was even more difficult to fathom. In 'this geometrically impeccable room with its dancing colors,' the writer felt 'relieved of all material burdens' and 'absorbed into the all-highest.'[35] The tall, box-like room had five sides, no two the same length, comprising an irregular pentagon. The narrowest side, ahead and off to the left, was mostly glass, letting in a lot of daylight. The wall directly to the left of the entrance, was broken up by a vertical rectangular bulge in the middle of it to conceal a chimney. The three remaining unmatched walls were solid and straight. There were few furnishings, and except for the gramophone painted a vibrant red and the black pot belly stove near the center of the room, the objects had almost all been made a flat opaque white. The mélange of furniture included the two easels that supported each a large abstract

[34] The widow of Dutch composer Jacob van Domselaer mentions pictures of nude dancers in her published memories. See Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop, 'Herinneringen aan Piet Mondriaan', in: *Maatstaf* 7(1959)5, p. 290.

[35] *De Telegraaf* September 12 1926, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 30.

painting still in the works, as well as another bed, a large white desk with its single drawer painted the same red as the gramophone, and an old fashioned, ornate sofa painted black. On the matte white surface of the desk there were two solitary objects: a plain round ashtray, about six inches in diameter, also in the bright red, and a metal box painted blue. Opposite, on a white book shelf, one saw an identical ashtray, only now painted yellow, and another box, in the fire-engine red.

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The few people who came here to see Mondrian felt slightly unsettled. The place and its details were unique. It was not the streamlined modernism that would soon be labeled the "International Style," with each form reduced to a pure minimalism and rigid proportionality. The atmosphere was more humorous than meticulous. The stove on its short four legs resembled a peculiar small animal, like a fat dog or perhaps a hedgehog, with the horizontal pipe extending from its back into the chimney wall like a long straight tail. The position of a white-washed table and white square-shaped wicker chairs accommodated some private agenda which was not easy to ascertain, but which might have served as the stage set of a Noël Coward drawing room comedy. Here and there, among the panels above, there were small mirrors that could have been in a dressing room.

While the backdrop conjured a mountain village after a fresh snowfall, the colors vibrated more and more the longer one looked. They chanted from the panels on the walls, from the unframed paintings of different periods hung in completely odd positions, some high above, practically touching the ceiling, others down near floor level, as well as from the work in process on the easel.

On the occasion of the visit from Röell, one of those two canvases was a white square, balanced tip-toe on one of its corners so that it appeared diamond-shaped. A few impeccably positioned horizontal and vertical black lines of differing width moved both over and under some small rectangles of intense yellow and blue on this painting which stood there like a dancer on point. The writer wondered how and when Mondrian would know that the work was finished, what it would take for Mondrian to feel he had achieved his goal. If his objective was to evoke weightlessness and motion that would never stop, he had won his battle. But maybe he would still find the means to inject a little more helium.

II

To enter Mondrian's universe is to encounter a singular form of beauty. No one else lived like this, and no one else painted this way. Many imitated his style, some of his contemporaries copied him, and in time the motifs he invented would appear on dresses and ladies' shoes, from discount stores to haute couture, just as his name would be used to confer a certain panache

on hotels and apartment buildings, but none of that was the same thing. The artist's existence on rue du Départ, and the art he made there, harnessed manic enthusiasm with exquisite control, both at their extremes. Most people live by half-measures, or follow someone else's ideas. Mondrian had created, in his rudimentary living quarters and bright airy work space, a private sanctuary, suited only for its sole inhabitant. What to others would be self-denial was for him the pathway to nirvana. Possessed by the fierce determination of a messiah, but with none of the self-consciousness of most messianic types, he used the ideal life he had created for himself to make paintings which, even when physically small and with their elements distilled to a minimum, became secure and uplifting worlds of their own.

The Dutch press had been covering Mondrian's work since the 1890s. The competent, mild-mannered pictures by the young artist who had not yet dropped the second "a" in "Mondriaan" had, back then, received favorable critical notice when they were shown alongside that of other students in the Academy in Amsterdam. Then there was an about-face when, around the turn of the century, Mondriaan, in his late twenties, evoked opprobrium for his unusual portraits of wide-eyed women in other-worldly trances, apparently dazed by their vision of heavenly splendor. The disapproval intensified in 1904 when the artist abruptly broke from his former life and went into rural seclusion in Brabant, a province in southern Netherlands. Retreating from urban life and his circle of acquaintances, he produced paintings of traditional subject matter—Dutch farmhouses and windmills and rivers and forests—but rendered these themes in a very untraditional way. Mondriaan eschewed the meticulousness with which more popular artists depicted such scenes. He composed his representations, rather, out of bold abstract planes and broad brushstrokes of saturated color. His new art, while too original and emotive for most of the mainstream critics and the population at large, had its champions, and to them he had become a painter of consequence. This is how it still was in 1926, and would be for the rest of his life. His unprecedented compositions would raise hackles with the majority of viewers but thrill his fans, even if they were small in number. It would only be well after the artist's life that his approach would become accepted on a wide scale; Mondrian, although deified by his changing coteries of admirers during the last two decades of his life, himself would never see a hint of the fame he has today.

Mainly, it was the art critics in the Netherlands who had continued to keep their eye on its native son after he went to Paris in 1912 and dropped the second "a" from his name. He had changed the spelling at the insistence of his uncle Frits, who had taught him how to paint. Once Mondrian was rocking boats, Frits, a traditional and commercially successful painter of the same last name, wanted to make sure no one confused them. Disavowing their connection, he persuaded his nephew to make the change.

This is one of many details the literature on the artist gets wrong, attributing the name change mainly to stylistic preference; while it is true

that Mondrian, once he dropped the second "a", relished the new succinctness, in 1914 he wrote a friend that he had initially made the change at the insistence of the well-known painter uncle who 'thought that it was to his disadvantage to have the same name'.[36] With the move to Paris and the shorter name which sounded more French than Dutch, the forty-year-old had completed his transformation into a full-fledged modernist. A handful of writers and museum people and collectors admired what they saw; others expressed vehement disapproval; but they were invariably attentive. Mondrian's work always had something which made it exceptional, so that it was a much-discussed attraction in the many exhibitions in which it was included. Fashion and the larger world being what it has always been, by the time Röell knocked on the studio door, the artist was a name on many people's tongues, and he was a myth. His reputation was still not what it would become after his lifetime, but he was sufficiently well known for these to be a lot of inaccuracies about him, and all sorts of rumor.

III

A few months after Mondrian had moved to Paris in January of 1912, he had begun to rent this studio space from a fellow Dutchman, Conrad Kickert.[37] A rich young painter and arts patron, Kickert divided his time between Paris and Amsterdam and had introduced Braque's and Picasso's art to the Netherlands in the preceding year.[38] An intriguing character, Kickert was one of the many people in Mondrian's life with whom there was a period of rapport, a friendship based on mutual interests without the sort of intimacy which would violate the artist's essential solitude, to be

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[36] Letter Piet Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, April 8,1914. RKD #0613 inv.nr.19. The idea that the name change was mainly due to stylistic preference was mentioned for the first time in the literature in 1922, see: Henry van Loon, *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* March 23 1922: 'P. Mondrian, the single vowel in the second syllable a concession to French usage'.

[37] For a biography of Kickert, see Lucien Gard, *Conrad Kickert: La Haye 1882 – Paris 1965: le peintre hollandais de Montparnasse*, Anne et Lucien Gard, 2006.

[38] This was on the occasion of the first exhibition of the Moderne Kunstkring, see for instance: A.B. Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne Kunst in Nederland. 1900-1914*, Veen/Reflex, Utrecht 1987, p. 109-111. Also: Geurt Imanse, 'Het ontstaan van de abstracte kunst in Nederland ca. 1900-1918 en het artistieke klimaat in die periode', in: Geurt Imanse [a.o.], *Van Gogh tot Cobra. Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1950*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, Amsterdam 1982, p.106-109; Judith Wesselingh, 'Conrad Kickert als voorvechter van het Nederlands modernisme', in: *Jong Holland* 3(1986)12, p. 4-13; Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland 1920-2000. Picasso als pars pro toto*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2001, p. 25-41.

followed by a complete schism. Kickert, having recognized Mondrian's unique genius, had been willing to help him, seeing his own gain in the association, only then to make the sort of complications Mondrian tried assiduously to avoid.

In 1914, Mondrian had been on a return trip to the Netherlands when war broke out. He lived too much in the clouds to have anticipated this, and his being in the wrong place at the wrong time left him unable to get back to his new home. He virtually camped out for the five years back in his homeland, needing to make monthly rent payments he could scarcely afford in order to keep his foothold in the place to which he perpetually expected to return right away.[39] His need to stay in vacant rooms and boarding houses and paint wherever he could, while he naively believed he would soon get back to his Paris studio, had not prevented him from making major strides in his art, developing a single visual language based on planes of solid color, turning a square canvas on one of its corners for his first diamond painting, and utilizing a grid so imaginatively that it shimmered. Finally, in June of 1919, when he was at last able to relocate permanently in the French capital, and to continue in new directions under more suitable circumstances, he was so happy that he resolved never to return to his native country. Mondrian would later claim that the reason was that he could not possibly set foot in a place where the Charleston was outlawed.[40]

When he returned to Paris in peacetime, however, Mondrian returned to the studio in rue du Départ. It was so dirty – 'much worse than I had expected' he would write to his friend Sal Slijper on July 21 – that he 'stood motionless for 15 minutes' although its spaciousness compared to the places he had inhabited in Holland shocked him above all. He lived at a friend's, a French person he left unnamed to Slijper, until he had spent some two weeks cleaning it before considering it a place fit to sleep in.[41] He soon moved to the rue de Coulmiers, going back to 26 rue du Départ only in October of 1921. It was larger, but also more expensive then the rue de Coulmiers. At the beginning of 1922 he was planning on making some extra money by painting watercolors of chrysanthemums and lilies.[42] The flowers were expertly rendered; the details were vivid, and the rendering, whether the blossom was budding or in full bloom or wilting, plausible. Rather than grouping them into the bouquets traditional for Dutch still-lifes, Mondrian painted single flowers, evoking the relationships to one another of the individual stamens and petals and leaves. He had made a conscious decision

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[39] Cf. J.M. Joosten, 'Documentatie over Mondriaan (4). 17 brieven van Piet Mondriaan aan ds. H. van Assendelft 1914-1919', in: *Museumjournaal* 18(1973)4, p. 172-179; 5, p. 218-223.

[40] 'If they go on forbidding the Charleston I shan't be coming back…' *De Telegraaf* September 12 1926, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 31.

[41] Letter Piet Mondrian to Sal Slijper, July 21 1919, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 127.

[42] Letter Piet Mondrian to Sal Slijper, January 1 1922, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 76.

to draw and paint the large spherical variety of chrysanthemums imported from the East, not the smaller ones indigenous to the Netherlands. He was precise about everything he did.

Mondrian had also recently been asked to do set designs and a house interior which, like his own living space, obliterated the usual distinction between "fine art" and the total environment.[43] With the Bauhaus flourishing in Weimar, Le Corbusier's sparkling villas starting to proliferate around Paris, airplanes crossing the skies on a daily basis, and furniture becoming leaner in form and devoid of ornament, buildings and paintings and household objects had acquired unprecedented clarity and élan all over the map, but Mondrian's interiors, while belonging to their époque, were completely original. The compositions for the walls he put into theatres and people's houses were austere but playful. Their luminous backgrounds were predominantly a meticulously chosen grayish white, or two such tones that were ever so slightly different, yet, to most viewers, discerned as identical. They were constructed of a few black horizontal and vertical lines, as refined and carefully calculated as the components of an airplane engine but clearly hand painted, with small powerful areas of one, two, or all three primary colors. The reds, yellow, and blues were at impeccably determined intervals from one another—creating rhythm and expressing energy and joie de vivre in a way that boggles the mind. These completely modern stage sets and living rooms have the same power as entire architectural environments of various epochs that are united in their capacity to inspire well-beings. What we take in through our eyes penetrates our entire being.

#

The stunned visitor to Mondrian's studio had never before known an occasion where art and its setting merged into one. His past experience of going to artists' studios inclined him, initially, to treat the paintings in process on Mondrian's two easels as focal points, with the setting as secondary. But after a few minutes he had come to realize that that approach was beside the point. Still following the instinct that had led him to anticipate a "treasure-filled cave"—the vision which accords prime importance to individual and finite art works, with the sort of hierarchy that makes gold more valuable than silver, rather than allowing that the cave, made of ordinary rock, is as valuable as the treasures—he then took into account the group of paintings which Mondrian had hung at different heights all over the studio. After all, identifiable "pictures," some already known through their printed reproductions, should count above other sights. He needed a new way of thinking, however. Mondrian's lust for color and shape called for something different. The artist's intoxication with seeing that had its origins in his appreciation of the offerings of nature—trees, flowers, the dunes, the sea, the sky—when he was young, and that

[43] For Mondrian and architecture, see Carel Blotkamp, *Mondriaan in detail*, Veen/Reflex, Utrecht-Antwerpen 1987, p. 9-101.

now focused on manmade hues and shapes, was all-inclusive. That flurry of colored rectangles that Mondrian had hung in the white spaces that remained between the paintings were like stars in the universe, none having greater or lesser merit than the other. Röell writes, 'The artistic conception of the wall, however, seems to render the canvas redundant, superfluous. I therefore ask Mondrian's views about the interrelation. '"There are no absolute differences for me, not like Léger, who makes a distinction between the easel painting as compressed inwardness, and the pleasing outward effect of the decorative wall. Just as my painting is an abstract surrogate for the whole, the abstract plastic wall is part of the profound content of the entire room. Instead of being superficially decorative, the whole wall conveys the impression of an objective, universal mentality, displayed in the strictest of stylistic forms.'"[44]

The interior where Mondrian had most recently put this concept to work was for the adventurous collector Ida Bienert in Dresden. And he was currently creating sets for Michel Seuphor's play *The Ephemeral is Eternal*.[45] For this theatre piece with singing and ballet in it, he was equipping the shallow rectangular stage with three screens that were raised in sequence to make a different set for each of the three acts, all of which take place in eternity rather than on the earth. Röell talked with Mondrian about these backdrops. They revealed the artist's 'aversion to depth,' which he considered 'far too naturalistic'. Of the actors, Mondrian declared, 'As far as I am concerned, they are unnecessary.' Mondrian would have preferred for them to be 'behind screens so that the audience wouldn't have to look at them and could just follow the text'.[46]

This was his belief, equally, concerning his own persona and the audience for his compositions of color and line.

IV

1.

Besides being a dramaturge and a painter, the Belgian Michel Seuphor was a writer on abstract art. He was the prototype of a Mondrian apostle. From the time when Mondrian was a struggling young painter in Amsterdam until his death as a world-renowned artist in New York in 1944, Mondrian had in

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[44] *De Telegraaf* September 12 1926, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 30-31.

[45] Michel Seuphor wrote *L'éphémère est Eternel* during his stay in Rome in February 1926. See also: Michel Seuphor, *Het vergankelijke is eeuwig. Een theatertekst met decors van Mondriaan met een inleiding van Henri-Floris Jespers*, Uitgeverij Jef Meert, Antwerpen 1999.

[46] *De Telegraaf* September 12 1926, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 31.

his life a succession of younger men who deified him and who did their best to be his aides-de-camp. Seuphor, who first managed to meet Mondrian in 1923 when he was twenty-two—he was twenty-nine years younger than his hero—was among the most loyal and long-lasting of the lot and he was also the one who in 1956 published the first monography on the artist.[47]

Seuphor was smart, sensible, and he was perceptive, but he both filtered and embellished his vision of Mondrian for publication of his Mondrian tome in 1956. But we get nuggets that might be more accurate in some personal reminiscences Seuphor wrote in 1946, just two years after Mondrian's death, and which were written and published in Dutch. There, Seuphor provides a vivid impression of what Mondrian was actually like in this studio on the rue du Départ: 'Those who travelled great distances to see him imagined they would be meeting a pope in full regalia. But Mondrian, like an earnest child, treated them to a dance performance to the sounds of a small gramophone, which he had painted red. Instead of the anticipated exalted atmosphere of perfection, they were confronted with the tired jazz music of Chicago and Shanghai!

Style and credo are interwoven allover: heart-felt sincerity and spiritual purity going hand in hand in one and the same man. That was particularly striking in Mondrian. I remember his childishness, the old-bachelorish habits which sometimes astonished visitors.'[48]

#

I had the good fortune to hear firsthand about that sort of surprise when, in 2011, I interviewed the octogenarian Ben Sanders. Ben Sanders's father, Paul Sanders, a Dutch composer and journalist born in 1891, was another of Mondrian's loyal, young acquaintances. When Ben was approaching adolescence in the mid 1930s, he went with his mother to see Mondrian on the rue du Départ. Mondrian was sufficiently close to the family for the boy to call him "Uncle Piet," but he always felt that the artist was stand-offish. When they arrived, Uncle Piet, as usual, gave Ben the impression that he did not like children. Now more than ever, Ben was feeling irrelevant in Mondrian's presence, without realizing that this was because of Mondrian's focus on Mrs. Sanders without Mr. Sanders present. Then, less than five minutes after they had arrived, Mondrian asked Ben's mother to dance with him. She agreed without hesitation. Ben sat there stupefied when Mondrian

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[47] Michel Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian. Life and Work*, Harry N. Abrams, New York; Contact, Amsterdam 1956.

[48] Michel Seuphor, 'Piet Mondrian. Overpeinzingen en herinneringen', in: *Piet Mondriaan. Ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling van zijn werk in het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam November-December 1946*, [Stedelijk Museum], Amsterdam 1946, p. 14-22. Quote on p. 15. Seuphor, born in Antwerp in 1901, wrote in Dutch and French. The first letters from Mondrian to Seuphor (from 1925) are written in Dutch. Later on Mondrian started to write in French to Seuphor. There are no reasons to assume that this specific text for the 1946 catalog was written in French and translated into Dutch.

put a disk on his gramophone and whirled his partner onto the studio floor as if they were in a ballroom. They danced for about half an hour—waltzes, two-steps, even something approximating a tango—while the boy simply watched. When Mondrian and Mrs. Sanders stopped, they had a brief conversation, but Ben's mother had barely caught her breath when she said goodbye to her husband's friend, led Ben to the door, and they left, with Mondrian at the last minute giving Ben a cordial but distant handshake. That was the entire visit.

A few years later, however, Ben Sanders was privy to a series of events that made him think of Mondrian as less selfish. Ben's uncle, Martijn Sanders, was a successful stockbroker, married into a family of prosperous tobacco merchants. Paul Sanders got in touch with his rich brother to say that the artist Piet Mondrian was quite ill, apparently with pneumonia, and almost completely out of funds. Mondrian was struggling to make his rent payment and cover his modest living expenses on the rue de Départ. Could Martijn buy a painting?

Martijn immediately sent between three hundred and four hundred guilders (Sanders could not remember the exact amount), somewhat between two thousand four hundred and three thousand two hundred dollars, and told Paul to select a canvas from Mondrian. Mondrian responded by saying that for that much money Martijn should have two paintings. Paul selected two wonderful abstract compositions accordingly.[49]

The story, discussed by his parents at dinner one night, made a strong impression on the teenage Ben Sanders. He knew that, in this period of the mid-1930s when the worldwide economic depression was affecting almost everybody, money was tight, but he had not imagined that an artist who was already famous in elite circles of supporters of avant garde art earned so little and struggled that much. Nor had he ever heard of such lack of greed and simple decency.[50]

2.

In those off-the-cuff recollections Michel Seuphor wrote two years after Mondrian's death, Seuphor brings others of the artist's traits into sharp

[49] B131 and B135; Toward the end of the twentieth century, those two paintings became significant financial assets for Martijn Sanders's two daughters, each of whom inherited one. I knew one of the sisters, Ella Schaap, and actually met Martijn when I was in my early thirties and he was a hundred and two. I wish I had known then that he had rescued Piet Mondrian from destitution or worse. Mrs. Schaap told me the story of her father's and uncle's teamwork to save the painter. She and her sister both gave their Mondrian paintings to museums; the sense of generosity and fairness—Mondrian's and the Sanders brothers's—was sustained.

[50] Conversation with Ben Sanders, Falls Village CT., January 2011.

focus. Mondrian's eccentricities fade from dominance, replaced by his sheer courage.

The writer who knew his subject from the vantage point of someone a generation younger homes in on Mondrian's alacrity in embracing the new. The recluse on the rue du Départ was, when he took of his white painting overalls and donned a good suit, not the least bit averse to stepping out into the modern world.

He thought that all that was truly contemporary– even the latest swings of Parisian fashion – was indicative of human progress. About any number of subjects, he would tell Seuphor, 'It's always another step forwards.'[51] In particular, it was imperative to keep up with the latest dance fads; the greater the novelty, the better.

That indiscriminate embrace of the latest trend separated Mondrian from most of his modernist colleagues. The teachers at the Bauhaus emphasized universal truths and the principles of the natural world as fundamentals. Pioneering as they were, Walter Gropius and Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky pushed the students toward a quality of timelessness that eschewed fashion and emphasized a classic sense of form and an efficient functionalism. They hoped to have an impact on current style, which meant resisting the shifts in taste that come from sources they deemed unworthy. Sure, they noticed the latest crazes out there, but elegance and refinement counted heavily for them; they might be amused by the latest style gimmick that blew in with the wind, but they considered themselves above popular trends. Novelty in and of itself was not only useless, but suspect.[52] That Mondrian could enjoy the fads of the moment reflects his extraordinary sense of security, his comfort that his own course was so on target that there was no risk of deviation if he was intrigued by what was au courant. He would dress and paint according to his own self-defined standards, but he was fascinated by what was new and different.

He had no fear of what was less than serious, even absurd in the eyes of others. Seuphor describes Mondrian dancing solo. It was quite a sight.

> 'These dancing exhibitions were torture for me: I had to avert my eyes to avoid bursting into tears, because all that jumping about made such a pathetic contrast with the nobility of the paintings. But Mondrian, like every truly pure creature, had no sense of the risible. He had no suppleness whatsoever, but was utterly wooden in his movements, although he was tall and well built.'[53]

The painter allowed to Seuphor that, not only did he perform in this way for visitors, but this was his regular habit when no one else was there to observe. What he looked like when he lacked an audience will never be

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[51] Seuphor, *Overpeinzingen*, p. 16.

[52] This observation is based on the author's own discussions on the subject with Josef and Anni Albers.

[53] Seuphor, *Overpeinzingen*, p. 16.

known. But it was essential for him to experiment with the very latest steps being done in popular dance halls; anything that was the rage was worth doing well.

#

Regardless, Mondrian was very conscious of how he presented himself in public.

He had gone through many stages in his looks. In his youth, nature had distinguished him, with his shock of thick black hair, from his three younger brothers, their finer, sandy locks kept trim. From the start, he wore a brooding expression on his face in all family photos, while the others smiled agreeably. The angry adolescent then became the bearded Bohemian, the rebel in a clean-cut family. After that, he was the scraggly mystic who looked like a cult leader in an ashram.

In 1911, Mondrian again transformed himself, now shaving his beard, trimming his hair, and coming to resemble a respectable Dutch businessman. He remained that way for the next few years. But in the period when the writer from *De Telegraaf* visited him, he was in yet another phase. With a "toothbrush mustache" that bears an unfortunate resemblance to the one Adolf Hitler would subsequently make famous, his large perfectly round wire-rimmed spectacles, his hair combed straight back and flattened, either kept wet or under the control of a fixative, so that the full height of his ovoid forehead beamed light, he looked like a performer presenting a carefully constructed image to the public. At this moment of our walking in on him in 1926, the Mondrian who had fully made his mark for his signature abstractions pretty much looked like a bandleader, or the front-of-the-house person in a posh restaurant. He wore trimly fitted suits with wide notched lapels and long tapered jackets, fine silk neckties over a collar pin, and elegant pocket squares. Apparently he could afford it. Everything about him had the effect of a new confidence, but also concealment.

#

When Michel Seuphor later wrote the book that became the gospel on Mondrian, he would embellish and theorize, but when he reminisced privately closer to the artist's lifetime he poignantly evoked what made Mondrian tick. He emphasized that Mondrian's sole purpose in life was to make his art. Everything else was in service to that goal. He absorbed rhythm in music so as to express it better in his painting; he availed himself of anything modern that advanced his artistic technique. But his personality was rife with contradictions. He played the latest dance music on the gramophone, but could not operate a telephone or drive a car. He had the courage to live exactly as he wanted, yet was terrified when someone else was driving fast. He danced in front of strangers yet was possessed of an 'extraordinary bashfulness.'[54]

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[54] Seuphor, *Overpeinzingen*, p. 18.

Mondrian however was living in a state of penury surprising for someone of his critical succees in the 1920s. Many artists and designers of the era were able to eke out a decent living; Le Corbusier, for example, while fifteen years Mondrian's junior, and from even more modest a family background, had a luxurious apartment not far from Mondrian's studio and could indulge his fondness for oysters, and Mies Van der Rohe, a construction worker's son, puffed expensive cigars in his fine Berlin digs. Even if they were not raking in the fortunes made in their fields today, some of the most popular avant-garde painters, like Picasso, could afford Bugattis, travel well, and employ good cooks.

Even while the modernists at the Bauhaus were straining because of the horrendous inflation in Germany, to such an extent that when Klee and Kandinsky met in a Weimar café in 1923 they had to leave before ordering because they could not afford for each to have his own cup of coffee, in Paris most artists of Mondrian's caliber lived comfortably on what they earned when their dealers sold their work to affluent collectors.[55] Mondrian, however, was so destitute that Seuphor never got over it. In 1994, when he was ninety-three-years old, Seuphor recalled that the building on the rue du Départ 'was a run-down building in the rue du Départ, old and filthy, with a rickety staircase leading up to the third floor. Everything was grimy, shoddy, sad, depressing.' Those dingy stairs 'smelled like coffee and worm-eaten wood'.[56]

Seuphor describes how dismayed he was on his first visit, in April 1923, when the artist he worshipped opened the door and led him through what he describes as another dark brown passage. This was in fact where the white curtain was, shielding the white bed and the photographs of Josephine Baker, but Seuphor has no idea of any of this—presumably because Mondrian had not turned on the light and opened the front curtain that shielded the enclosure where he slept. For Seuphor, it was like a journey through some unknown hell, a grim passageway to more worn out steps and another door.

What struck him above all amidst this squalor was that Mondrian emitted only optimism. With his erect posture, the artist ushered Seuphor through the small cavern with a bold stride, opening the second door with deliberate theater. Mondrian held the door with himself out of the way so as not to block Seuphor's first impression of paradise. 'He made way for me to pass and there, on that threshold, I got the biggest surprise of my life. The

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[55] Nicholas Fox Weber, *The Bauhaus Group. Six Masters of Modernism*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2009, p.143.

[56] Ageeth Scherphuis, 'Vrienden over zijn vrouwen, zijn smaak, zijn armoede', in: *Vrij Nederland Special Haags Gemeentemuseum*, VN/BV Weekbladpers, Amsterdam 1994, [n.p.].

contrast between that shabby, dingy exterior and the studio - wide, spacious, clean and completely white - was like stepping from hell into heaven.'[57]

The younger artist, twenty-two to Mondrian's fifty-one, was expecting Mondrian to be a sort of eminence grise, 'very sure of himself' in the style of the great intellectuals Seuphor had met to date. On the contrary, he found someone modest and accessible. 'But I stood face to face with a friendly, unassuming gentleman, who didn't speak in miracles, on the contrary, who said *nothing* at all about himself.'[58]

Seuphor, who at the time of that first visit was editor of *Het Overzicht*, a Belgian modernist literary magazine, had made Mondrian's studio his last port of call after eight days of interviews in which the people he had seen included Picasso, Brancusi, Léger, Delaunay, Cocteau, Ozenfant, Céline, and Tzara.[59] Having saved the one he most admired, and therefore feared more than any of the others, for last, he had arrived at Mondrian's studio at 8:30 a.m. Years later, Mondrian, who showed no sign of annoyance at the time, would allow that he only received visitors starting late in the afternoon so that he could stick to his own rigorous work schedule. But he was not the sort of person to make his young interlocutor self-conscious or uncomfortable.

On that very first visit, in spite of the hour, Mondrian was quick to offer his visitor, who was patently hungry, some lentils and potatoes—the food on which he survived—as well as a glass of white wine. Seuphor quickly deduced that Mondrian was domestically competent, shopped for his own groceries, and cooked for himself. He also cleaned the studio fastidiously. There was not a speck of dust visible; nor would there be the slightest disorder or dirt on Seuphor's subsequent visits, over the course of many years.[60] The world outside, and its shortcomings, came to an end once one was harbored in the studio where Piet Mondrian had created his ideal and made his paintings of unparalleled clarity and optimism.

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[57] Scherphuis, *Vrienden*, [n.p.]

[58] Scherphuis, *Vrienden*, [n.p.]

[59] *Het Overzicht* was a literary, cultural and political magazine founded in 1921 by Geert Pynenburg and Michel Seuphor. The magazine was first published on June 15 1921. In 1922 Jozef Peeters joined the editorial office: from then on, the magazine focused on the national and international artistic avant-garde. During four years, 24 issues were published. The last issue was published in 1925, shortly before Seuphor moved to Paris. The year before Seuphor first visited Mondrian, he had been in Berlin and all artists there advised him to go to Paris. See: Christiane Germain & Paul Haim, *Michel Seuphor. Une vie à angle droit*, Éditions de la Différence, Paris 1988, p. 27.

[60] For Mondrian's neatness and order, see: J.J.P. Oud, 'Mondriaan, de mens', in: L.J.F. Wijsenbeek; J.J.P. Oud, *Mondriaan*, W. de Haan, Zeist; Standaard Boekhandel, Antwerpen 1962, p. 61-81; p. 72; 'Piet has become crazy, he takes off dust with cottonwool in his nose to make sure no dirt gets in!'

On that first visit the young Michel Seuphor made to the artist he admired even more than Picasso or any of the other pioneers taking painting beyond its limits in the 1920s, he was struck especially by the small card tacked onto the painted brown door.[61]

All that it said was "Piet Mondriaan." It could not have been simpler: in a classic Roman type style, black ink, not a word more. Mondrian had gone to the trouble to have it engraved, broke as he was.

Here we get to a niggling question about Michel Seuphor as a source, however. Seuphor spells "Mondriaan" with two "a"s in the card on the studio door in Paris, whereas Mondrian had dropped the second "a" by then. Some of these calling cards he used in the 1920s still exist, and corroborate that Seuphor had made a mistake. Given the extent to which the world's impression of Mondrian has derived from Seuphor as *the* seminal source for biographical facts and for a portrait of Mondrian's personality—that influence cannot be overstated; for ages there was nothing else, and Seuphor's book was the Rosetta stone for the artist—Seuphor's indifference to accuracy has had a profound impact, leaving behind a groundwork of false information at the same time that Seuphor could be richly observant and wise in his creation of the "Mondrian" who has long been the world's image of the man.

Seuphor's adding the "a" was not simply a spelling mistake. It had the effect of making Mondrian more foreign, a Dutchman in Paris rather than a local. Seuphor cultivated this notion of Mondrian having been an outsider. Seuphor insists, in his book, equally, on Mondrian's extreme awkwardness with women, and the poor quality of his dancing—all further evidence of his essential distance from other people.

More obscure sources, many never published, reveal other sides. Women, as many as three at a time, were often madly in love with Mondrian. He was not always an Adonis. Assuming we trust the woman's late life account, there would be one occasion in his life when love, made him not just willing, but desperate, to chuck the entire life he had carved out for himself carefully. It was at the moment when he was his most successful, and, the daughter of a friend, she was about a third of his age. Whether her story was valid, there is no doubt that Mondrian's existence was ruled by intense, uncompromising feelings.

Every one of the few eyewitnesses afforded the rare opportunity of penetrating Mondrian's decrepit building and getting past the shabby entrance door to his studio was, it seems, similarly intoxicated. Color, line, art, and the power of music, made the extreme material deprivation irrelevant. At least no one we know of felt otherwise—not even his younger brother Carel, and Carel's wife, who were the only of Mondrian's relatives who ever visited.

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[61] Scherphuis, *Vrienden*, [n.p.].

3.

What was salient to many was the pulse of joyful ballroom dancing. Peter Alma, a Dutch painter fourteen years younger than Mondrian, observed that Mondrian 'was not, in any case, an ascetic on principle; it was his empty purse and the inevitable scrimping that often obliged him to adopt such an attitude. Dancing, for Mondrian, was sheer delight, but at the same time a serious activity; there was a certain correspondence between the rhythm of dance music and the rhythmic motion within his paintings.'[62]

The Dutch architect J.J.P. Oud would, in 1962, recall of Mondrian, 'I have seen him dance with a lively girl to the modern musical rhythms he liked so much (jazz in particular), and while following the rhythm of the music, he seemed to be producing a cross-rhythm of his own. Lost in thought, yet ever in perfect time, he was in fact creating an aesthetic, or rather an aestheticized, dancing figure: an 'abstract' dancing figure, you might say.'[63]

Oud was a modernist of the generation younger than Mondrian's. He was one of many artists enamoured of straight lines and right angles for whom Mondrian was a cross between hero and idol. But Mondrian as a person was an enigma to him. On one of their first encounters, Oud was more than slightly puzzled when he arrived at the rue du Départ studio and Mondrian opened the door half-shaved, his face divided in two by a vertical line. Apparently this was his usual procedure. Mondrian would imagine a boundary that separated the left and right sides of his face and then, both above and below his mouth, proceed to shave one half. Once the first side was absolutely smooth, without a millimeter of a whisker, he would stop and take a break. Then he would move on.

Oud watched while the artist applied cream and brushed it into a lather on the second half. Then Mondrian shaved it with such fastidiousness that the task took half an hour. Working the razor—a long thin blade—with his right hand, he continuously used the left to check for the slightest stubble. It was a serious operation that had to be executed with military precision.

Oud observed that Mondrian ate a pear with a similar meticulousness and reverence for geometry. He would begin by peeling it. Then he would cut it into matched segments. They were remarkable close in scale and form, given that he did not use any measuring device other than his eye. Only then would he eat the pieces of fruit, slowly and attentively.[64]

Shortly after Mondrian's death, Oud would recall that the painter he had known for over a quarter of a century was 'one of those rare cases of man

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[62] Peter Alma, 'Piet Mondriaan', in: *Piet Mondriaan. Ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling van zijn werk in het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam November-December 1946*, [Stedelijk Museum], Amsterdam 1946, p. 26.
[63] Oud, *Mondriaan, de mens*, p. 62.
[64] Oud, *Mondriaan, de mens*, p. 70-71.

and artist, habit and work forming one indivisible whole.'[65] In the everyday acts of his life as in painting and dancing, he depended on straight lines and right angles, carefully measured and manipulated, to provide a sense of harmony and balance. It was as if he had to calibrate everything with a ruler to stay sane. In 1926 André Kertész visited Mondrian's studio, where he saw the painter's bold geometric abstractions for the first time and made the now-famous series of portraits and photographs of Mondrian and his studio and living quarters. Trying to capture the spirit of Mondrian's spare and structured paintings, Kertész photographed the artist framed by the geometrical patterns of his studio. A close-up of Mondrian was taken after Kertész discovered that Mondrian, in order to balance an asymmetrical face, had trimmed his moustache shorter on one side.[66]

Mondrian ordered his existence according to his precise needs and unequivocal goals. Austerity suited him. He would have no sooner lived lavishly than he would put one of his paintings in a gilded rococo frame. He needed only enough money to survive as a full-time artist. He always lived alone. He accepted the inevitability of food and sex, and determined what he needed of both in a highly controlled way. He enjoyed clothing—he dressed elegantly, and was fastidious and stylish in his appearance—but everything was secondary to making art. His daily habits were like the grid that positions the pulsing yellows and blues and reds in his paintings, a refined system that gives priority to what matters. Mondrian's regimentation and lean life style were no burden to him; they were a choice that made him happy.

'How refined and fastidious he was; how seriously and devotionally he treated everything,' Oud recalled. 'How strong he was in his conviction, and how mild in his judgment.'[67]

#

Mondrian was, Oud tell us, 'a character not only averse to compromise, but also, in its ingenuous purity, not even capable of conceiving the possibility of compromise.'[68]

He only moved to Paris in middle age, but he was one of those rare people who responded to the issues that often come to a head at the time of one's fortieth birthday to reconfigure his life totally. The results of the new way of life he carved out for himself, and the essential shift he made in his art from representation to abstraction, succeeded in bringing him greater

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[65] J.J.P. Oud, 'Piet Mondriaan', in: *Piet Mondriaan. Ter gelegenheid van de tentoonstelling van zijn werk in het Stedelijk Museum te Amsterdam November-December 1946*, [Stedelijk Museum], Amsterdam 1946, p. 29.

[66] "Acquisitions/1993": '57. André Kertész, Piet Mondrian, 1926', *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 22(1994), p. 91. Cf. Léon Hanssen, *De schepping van een aards paradijs. Piet Mondriaan 1919-1933*, Em. Querido's Uitgeverij BV, Amsterdam/Antwerpen 2015, p. 324-326.

[67] Oud, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 29.

[68] Oud, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 29.

happiness and mitigating his earlier frustration; they also allowed a fusillade of creativity that would benefit a broad spectrum of the world at large. From that point forward, no human intimacy would get in the way of his work. With his natal family, once he had moved from home at age twenty, he had remained polite but distant; this was even more so the case after he left the Netherlands. He would mostly avoid getting close enough to another person to expose himself to the possibility of emotional disturbance; he became oblivious to politics; he showed no interest in vacations, hobbies, and most other indulgences. The two world wars that he experienced were problems to be resolved so that he could continue to make art. Mondrian was rarely upset about anything.

#

Mondrian devoted himself simply to constructing his bright and shiny vehicles of celebration. He did so with the modesty and self-assuredness usually associated with Zen masters or monks. He was, apparently, invulnerable.

Most people picture Mondrian as he appears in well-known photo portraits by André Kertész and Arnold Newman: a statuesque, confident man with every element of his existence locked firmly into place. He stands as rigidly upright as the easel which is the twin to his body. The whiteness of the surroundings is perfect; his clothes fit flawlessly, without the hint of a wrinkle. Other twentieth century masters—Picasso, Matisse, Modigliani, Balthus, Pollock, De Kooning—have their stories, the dramas and colorful anecdotes reflected in their appearance and the settings in which they lived. Mondrian is different. The name conjures few biographical details, no scandals, no conflicts. There was never any suggestion that he wore a mask or concealed something dramatic, only that he was slightly quirky.

So it has always seemed.

PART I

Beginnings

I

Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan entered the world in a small red and white city at the precise center of the Netherlands. Amersfoort, not far from Utrecht, might have been positioned at that midpoint with calipers and a measuring tape, half way between the North Sea to the west and the German border to the east, and equidistant from the Belgian border to the south and the Netherlands' jagged northern coastline.

As a result of its location, Amersfoort, a city of narrow canals, is a major railway junction. A key stop on one of the Netherlands' primary north-south lines and one of its most important east-west ones, the train station was the most frequented structure in town when Mondrian was born there in 1872. If travelers from all over the country walked through that station, the two churches whose steeples towered everything else were where the locals spent most of their time; Amersfoort was a bastion of devout Christianity.

The straight steel rail tracks crisscrossing Mondrian's hometown have the bold decisiveness of the lines Mondrian would use to parse up his sophisticated abstract compositions. The ambient colors of Amersfoort, however, were more muted than the vibrant whites, confident blacks, and light-producing blues and yellows and reds he would make the vocabulary of a new visual language. Except for a rare summer day or the occasions when a fresh snow blanketed the frozen canal opposite the Mondriaan family's house, Amersfoort was rarely bright. The skies were generally gray, and appearances subdued. It rained a lot. Most of the six thousand men and seven thousand women who were there did not complain, however; their lives were devoted to work and the service of God, and they pursued both goals without quibble.[69]

The senior Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan, the artist's father, had moved with his new bride in 1869 to this town where they initially knew no one else because he had taken a new job there. Amersfoort was home to many members of the recently created Orthodox Protestant sect. In 1868, the God-fearing devotees of this new movement had founded the 'Vereeniging tot Bevordering van Christelijk Nationaal Schoolonderwijs' (Union for the Promotion of a Christian National Education). The sect leaders had bought a double dwelling on Kortegracht, a short street along a canal in the center of town, to start a school and give its headmaster a place to live. There were

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[69] Anco Mali, Bert Booij & Wim Scholtz, *Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan Senior*, Stichting Mondriaanhuis, Amersfoort; Vereniging Het Museum, Winterswijk 1994, p. 11.

already Roman Catholic schools in town, as well as state institutions without a strong religious affiliation, but this was the first educational establishment in Amersfoort exclusively for the new Protestant entity whose members insisted on such a restricted lifestyle that even the most devout Catholics were lax by comparison. Eager for a head of school who could enforce the strictures essential to a life of virtue, the Orthodox Protestants invited the twenty-nine-year-old Pieter Mondriaan, who had already made a name for himself in their arch-conservative movement, to come the ninety kilometers from The Hague, which was where he had been born and had lived until then.[70]

The Orthodox Protestants adhered to the most extreme tenets of Calvinism. They insisted that their many rules, and their list of forbidden activities, apply to political governance as well as to a person's everyday conduct. Pieter Mondriaan had a deep knowledge of the new religion's principles as well as the iron will to practice them and have others follow suit. He had been appointed to the post of headmaster, which would give him an important role in politics as well as education, because the sect's leaders had become impressed with his intense conviction and mettle. Beyond heading the school, he would be responsible for recruiting candidates not only for local government but later also for parliament to 'defend and disseminate protestant policy'.[71] Pieter Mondriaan was pleased to accept the potentially powerful job. He was convinced that it was the will of God that he pursue this agenda, and he considered himself sufficiently pure in thought and steadfast in demeanor to execute God's wishes.

At the start of 1869, the year of his summons to Amersfoort, this upright leader of the strict new order had married Johanna Christina Kok, who also came from The Hague. They had been neighbors at birth, and their birthdays were only two days apart: Johanna Christina Kok's was June 16, 1839, Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan's June 18 of the same year. They were older than average still to be unmarried—and, one assumes, virgins.[72]

On June 26, 1869, just after their thirtieth birthdays, the newly-weds had moved from The Hague to Amersfoort into the school annex that was to house its headmaster. Even in the summer months, their new dwelling was cold and damp, and immediately began to have bad effects on the bride's health, but Pieter Mondriaan was on his chosen path. Whatever her discomfort, Johanna, too, accepted her situation. A daughter was born in 1870. She was given the name Johanna Christina, exactly the same as her

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[70] Mali*, Pieter Cornelis,* p. 9-12.
[71] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p.147.
[72] During the entire period 1850-70, men married between the ages of 28.8 and 29.3 years on average, women between 27.3 and 27.7 years. Frans van Poppel, *Trouwen in Nederland: een historisch-demografische studie van de 19e en vroeg-20e eeuw*, Stichting Nederlands Interdisciplinair Demografisch Instituut, Den Haag 1992, p. 24.

mother. Then, on March 7, 1872, came the first son. Like his father, he was named Pieter Cornelis. There was no distinction whatsoever between the names of the two generations; "Senior" and "Junior" was used for neither mother and daughter nor father and son. It was intended to be a seamless life.

#

The house where Mondrian—as we call him, while referring to his father as Pieter Mondriaan—first saw daylight was a modest two-story structure. Its ground floor was faced in off-white plaster, under a steeply sloped roof covered in mottled terra cotta tiles that were the chalky salmon color in which so much of the Netherlands is constructed. The roof had large mansard windows protruding from it, while the ground floor had double-hung sash windows that were exceptionally wide and tall. These vertical rectangular fenestrations, divided into ample panes and running practically from floor to ceiling, were more typical of the school that was the structure's main purpose than of a private residence. As a result of all the glass, from the outside the house presented a lot of grayish reflections—of the canal that runs just a few meters in front of it, the sky, and the houses opposite on the other side of the canal. Inside, the schoolmaster's residence had more light than the average domestic dwelling.

The other houses in the neighborhood, being purely residential rather than dual-purpose, had less glass on their façades. Predominantly wall rather than window, they were cozier and more private than the Mondriaans'. The headmaster's family lived in the public eye.

Certain things were, however, of a piece all over town. The main materials everywhere—in domestic and public buildings, in the crisp vertical sides of the canals, in the quays and the cobblestone walkways—were brick, natural stone, and pale plaster mixed in a range of off-whites, warm grays, and dusty reds. The mélange had the same warm, muted tonality as the Dutch towns in paintings by Vermeer and De Hooch. The indigenous architecture has a calm equilibrium consonant with the underlying orderliness intrinsic to Dutch culture. The older precinct of Amersfoort reflected the balanced, thoughtful vision of the designers who gave everything from building façades to shop signs to canal bridges the pleasant but taciturn character that proliferated throughout the Netherlands.

Amersfoort at the end of the nineteenth century was a town with everything in proportion, the houses and shops all uniform in their small scale. The only exceptions were in the service of God. The two church steeples, both atop massive buildings, soared heavenward. The taller one, with its belfry built in the Gothic era, was Catholic. The slightly shorter St. Joris Church, on the main square where the shops and cafés were, was Dutch Reformed. Some people believed that the Protestant steeple was that tiny bit shorter because the congregants who prayed beneath it were more modest and humble in the face of God, while others thought it was because the Protestants were less successful in their efforts to be near Him than the

Catholics were. It was a strong rivalry, and when Pieter Mondriaan had his son baptized at the St. Joris Church, he was certain he was conferring holiness on his baby in the only way that was in keeping with God's wishes.

The narrow carriage ways and canals, the winding walkways, and the assemblage of three-story houses and public buildings constructed in various styles over the centuries, had a remarkable coherence. The structures of the eighteenth and nineteenth century had been designed in a harmonious relationship with the grander mansions that remained from the Netherlands' Golden Age; the result was a homogenous amalgam of the old with the older. There was a prevailing calm in this place where Mondrian was born and spent his formative years; there was also a rich sense of the past, and an ambiance of tradition.

People had lived in the region ever since hunter gatherers set up camps in the Mesolithic period. Traces of settlements from around 1000 B.C. remained in walking distance of the Mondriaans' house, although Amersfoort had not been given its name, which derived from its location on a ford on the Amer River (today the Eem), until the eleventh century.[73] The Bishop of Utrecht granted Amersfoort its city rights in 1259, at which point work began on walls to circumscribe the entire town, and then on construction of those two large churches. The city flourished in the Middle Ages, when breweries, the textile industry, and the cultivation of tobacco bolstered its economy. When Pieter Mondriaan arrived there in 1869 to teach the local children the path of righteousness, it was a prosperous place with lively brasseries, good shops, and a growing economy thanks to the recent connection to the railroad network.[74]

The comforts of Mondrian's childhood—the pleasant locale, the amenities enjoyed by the Dutch bourgeoisie in a period of prosperity—would determine his expectations, and his idea of the norm, forever after. So did the stoicism and absolutism of his father's emphatic religiosity. Yet, even as he would echo and reflect the givens of his youth, the individual who ultimately lived surrounded by panels of vibrant color, not just on the rue du Départ but elsewhere in Paris and London and New York as well, would be one of those rare people who invents his own life. Mondrian's reds would eventually be brighter than any in his childhood. His yellows would be the vibrant and pure hue of tropical sunlight, unlike any tone he witnessed even on the hottest Dutch summer day. His blues would be punchier and more electric than the Netherlandish skies of Jacob van Ruisdael's landscapes and Berckheyde's city views, however clear and luminous those painters made them. Above all, Mondrian's spirit would be more exuberant, more devil-may-care than that of anyone else in his family

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[73] Rob Kemperink; Burchard Elias (red.), *'Bruit van d'Eem' Geschiedenis van Amersfoort*, Uitgeverij Matrijs, Utrecht 2009, p. 38.

[74] Mieke Heurneman, *Het A'foort boek*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2009, p. 232.

or the rest of the local citizenry. Much as he was like them in his devotion to a sacred purpose, he was a complete original in his love of pleasure and his sense of what it was that was sacred.

II

When the senior Pieter Mondriaan assumed his position in Amersfoort, it was the market town for its rural surroundings. The pleasant if undramatic landscape formed by those vast expanses of perfectly flat fields, well irrigated and hospitable to farming, was the setting of Mondrian's first encounters with nature. Punctuated by straight rows of poplars and other orderly trees, the scenery was neatly divided, the result of careful planning and rational thinking, rather than lanscape in a more savage form. On the rare occasions when Pieter and Johanna and their young children went on outings into this flat, gridded countryside, it imprinted on them its logic, and inspired belief in the human capacity for control.

The townspeople, by and large, were unpolished country types, less couth than the scenery. They were known for their no-nonsense speaking manner, and were less polished and urbane than the men and women with whom Pieter and Johanna had grown up in The Hague. Once one got past the gruffness, however, the locals exemplified friendliness and kindness. It was not, though, a homogeneous society. The Orthodox Protestants, with their black clothing and somber demeanor that conspicuously declared their denial of everyday pleasures, stood out among the rest of the Dutch Reformed community. And they could hardly be confused with the Catholics and the Jews. The new sect was the only group in town where everyone immediately recognized who they were. They brandished their extreme rectitude not just in their dour costume and abstemiousness, but also in their rigid observation of the Sabbath. As the children named Johanna and Pieter reached the ages of four and five and began to notice other people's responses, it was not always easy to feel themselves so readily identified as one of the arch Orthodox Protestants.

But to be in an awkward situation, or odd-person-out, did not faze young Pieter. In their independence and devotion to their chosen cause, Mondrian's parents were role-models for the person he would become. He would adhere to their conviction that you must stick to your beliefs at any price. The similarities stopped there, however. Neither his mother nor his father placed a premium on creativity; neither valued the cultivation of pleasure. And even those of Mondrian's relatives and ancestors who enjoyed the aesthetic aspects of life, more than his parents did, would not be able to fathom Mondrian's eventual willingness and desire to devote his life, at considerable personal sacrifice, to spreading sheer joy.

Still, a dedication to the visual was central to the profession of Mondrian's paternal grandfather. He coiffed people's hair and made wigs,

which meant that he understood proportion, balance, and issues of color. And Frits, his father's older brother would, late in life, manage the rare feat of surviving financially as an artist, earning a handsome income as a portraitist and landscapist who adhered scrupulously to the taste preferences of affluent bourgeoisie who gladly bought his work to decorate their homes without ruffling feathers. But no one in the family was the sort of person to renounce marriage, parenting, and material comfort to pursue a risky cause and daring aesthetic that had few supporters and many attackers. Mondrian would be completely unlike the rest.

Mondrian was one of those rare people for whom what was most nourishing and potentially beneficial in his childhood became the seeds of the future; then those seeds grew in unprecedented ways, fertilized as if by magic potions. By sacrificing what many people would have considered essential comforts, both physical and emotional, the misfit of the family would offer the world a rare and bountiful gift.

III

The mature Mondrian would rarely be given to backward glances. The past did not interest him; nothing in his emotional make-up caused him to be nostalgic. The act of creating his art was all that mattered, and his personal needs and chosen pleasures were all in service of that goal. He lived a streamlined existence that enabled him to focus first on his art and second on his writing. He made plans when required, but he rarely took holidays or traveled for pleasure or allowed anything to interfere with the singular objectives of his life.

Nor did he have significant myths to spin about himself. Mondrian was not one of those artists who contrive a persona or call attention to themselves. He had no wish for celebrity.

Once he was recognized as a significant artist, people began asking questions, however. Journalists wanted the usual information about his formation; the influences and sources of inspiration. He rarely engaged in those conversations, but there were two occasions, separated by thirty-seven years, when Mondrian summed up his own past for publication. He did so matter-of-factly—or at least so it seemed. We will see, first, how *he* presented his background and his upbringing, before considering what else we know of his youth.

In 1907, for the book *Onze Moderne Meesters,* written by F.M. Lurasco and published in Amsterdam, Mondrian was persuaded to write a minimal autobiographical sketch.[75] His inclusion in that book was a major event at the age of thirty-five, and he complied, in his taciturn way. He gives his birth

[75] F.M. Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, C.L.G. Veldt, Amsterdam 1907, [n.p.]

date and location, says his father—'who did a lot of drawing'—taught him to draw, credits his uncle Frits with teaching him to paint when he was fourteen, lists the two certificates that officially entitled him to teach drawing, and reports his study with a painter named Jan Braet von Überfeldt and his attendance at the 'Amsterdam Academy.' Writing about himself in the third person, he concludes, 'After that he worked independently, painting figures and landscapes at first, later only landscapes.'[76] One has the impression that everything fell into place rather easily. This autobiographical summary, while scant on details, presents Mondrian's life up until 1907 as smooth sailing, with his father his unfailing ally.

The second occasion of Mondrian talking about his early years was an interview he gave an American journalist, Jay Bradley, for the *Knickerbocker Weekly* at the start of 1944.[77] Although this was just before Mondrian became mortally ill, he was still at the peak of health and had no reason to anticipate his imminent death; his life in the U.S., where he had moved over three years earlier because of the difficulty in working in war-torn Europe, was going well. Mondrian told the essential facts the same way he had in 1907. But now he described a major father-son conflict. He recalled that his 'father was always drawing […] though it was only a hobby with him […] When it appeared that I wanted to devote my life to art, my father tried to discourage me. He lacked the money to pay for my studies and wanted me to get a job. But I clung to my art ambitions, and that was my father's sorrow.'[78]

At this point Mondrian says something very provocative: 'Another man paid for my studies for three years, sending me at 19 to the Amsterdam Academy of Fine Arts.'[79] Why didn't Jay Bradley ask him who on earth the other man was? Was the seventy-two-year-old Mondrian misremembering, or deliberately exaggerating, the support of a friend of his father's, J.A. Wormser, who housed him free of charge, even if the man certainly did not pay his tuition? Was there really some hidden angel, about whom all other traces seem non-existent, who took care of the lad for three years? Are we to believe that the man then abandoned him, or that it was Mondrian's decision to break free? Mondrian tells Bradley, 'At 22 began a very difficult time for me,' and goes on to explain that to survive he had to do bacteriological drawings for textbooks and classroom study, accept portrait commissions, and make copies of paintings in museums—until he finally began to sell his landscapes to a sufficient extent that he could pay the rent and put a meager amount of food on the table. 'It was a hard struggle but I

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[76] Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 145.
[77] J. Bradley, 'Piet Mondrian, 1872-1944. Greatest Dutch Painter of Our Time', in: *Knickerbocker Weekly*, February 14 1944, p. 16-24.
[78] Bradley, *Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 17.
[79] Bradley, *Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 17.

managed to make a living and was glad to be able to make just enough money to be able to do what I wanted to do.'[80]

Fifty-plus years after the time period under discussion, Mondrian presented a very different picture of it than he had in 1907. Now his father was both autocratic and non-supportive, another unnamed man had entered the picture, and he gave the impression that his early life was riddled with challenge.

Why would he have wanted to describe it all one way when it was fresh in his memory, the others in the cast of characters still alive, and depict it differently thirty-five years later? What were his youth and the main personalities in it really like?

IV

Mondrian's rigor, his life choices, and his retreat into an abstract universe, as well as the nature of that realm of gridded color which still benefits humankind, had their origins in the personalities of his two parents and his relationship to them.

To get a clear picture of Pieter and Johanna Mondriaan has required untangling a thorny mess of misinformation and false impressions. Since Mondrian's death, there have been writers who made the artist's story according to their own needs rather than a search for truth, combining a few facts with lots of fantasizing. One of the elements that gets exaggerated is the despotism of Mondrian's father, whereas time and again we have evidence that Mondrian Senior, however dour, was highly supportive of his artist son.

The big issue is Mondrian's father attitude toward him—the firstborn of four sons—and specifically toward his wish to be an artist. And then there is the question of the "other man" said—by Mondrian himself, late in life—to fund his first two years of education at the art academy of Amsterdam: no small matter.

Herbert Henkels—one of the major authorities on Mondrian, who was a curator at The Hague Municipal Museum, (the greatest repository of Mondrian's work), and who died in 2002—says that someone else, unnamed, paid for Mondrian's *first* year at the Rijksakademie.[81] An official document from the time period has been discovered since, however. It establishes with certainty that Mondrian had a full stipend for his tuition that year: a hundred guilders, provided by the royal family. The stipend was

[80] Bradley*, Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 18.
[81] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 156.

renewed for a second year as recommended by August Allebé, Director of the Academy, and was paid by the same source.[82]

Was the 1944 interview a rare bit of self-mythologizing on Mondrian's part, a wish to join Cézanne and other great artists whose father objected to their life choice? In fact, Mondrian's father, even if he had initially contested his son's plans to become a professional artist, not only helped him find lodging with the Wormsers, but wrote, warmly and fervently, to support his son's admission to the Academy and receipt of that stipend.[83] The question is what it was in Mondrian's childhood that prompted his rare deception, late in life, about his father's role.

Mondrian was generally truthful and straightforward, and he kept his personal relationships as undramatic as possible. He was determined to maintain harmony with almost everyone in his orbit. Clearly he had an unresolved pain concerning his father, for why else would he have falsified the facts? The truth is that his father abetted his course of action rather than hinder it, and there was no "other man" (a royal stipend was an official grant). Yet Pieter Mondriaan's oppressive nature left an indelible impact on his first-born son. His father's pomposity and self-righteousness were strong enough to overshadow what had been, at the time, his real helpfulness.

V

Pieter Mondriaan's absolute convictions governed the life of his growing family. Holier-than-thou, he was rigid and uncompromising about every aspect of the existence of his wife and young children. Mondrian would struggle lifelong with the issue of being the son of a man whom he closely resembled in his unwavering faith in his own convictions but from whom he was profoundly different in the essential nature of his beliefs. The son's faith was rich in pleasure; the father's was fraught with anguish. And while Pieter Mondriaan was inclined toward self-righteous, Mondrian had no sense of himself as virtuous or superior; Senior tried to ram his beliefs down other people's throats, threatening hell to those who did not follow them, much as he thought anyone who did subscribe to his ideas stood to gain a great deal. Mondrian promulgated a form of beauty that was universal in its nature and could be enjoyed by everyone, but he was not like his father in insisting on his credo.

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[82] See: C. Van Adrichem-Ammerlaan, *Mondriaan, het begin van een schilderscarrière*, Mondriaanhuis, Amersfoort 1993, [n.p.]

[83] See correspondence in Koninklijk Huisarchief Den Haag, Inv.nr. A47-X-87 nrs. 297 & 315, A47-X-94 nr. 1525, A47-X-101 nr. 1057, A47-X-105 nr. 1706. I thank Mrs. H.J. de Muij-Fleurke, archivist of the Koninklijk Huisarchief, for providing the letters to me in August 2011.

What was even harder for Mondrian during his childhood than Pieter's absolutism was that he came to know his father in two very different stages. The first, in Mondrian's early childhood, was when Pieter Mondriaan was confident he would change the world. The second was when he was profoundly unhappy. Mondrian's father would descend from an abiding assuredness to a profound sense of failure and discombobulation. His son, in the years of his own psychological formation, stood witness.

#

Initially, the schoolmaster's program was on target, and in the first years in Amersfoort, his father was successful in advancing Orthodox Protestantism. Pieter Mondriaan flourished, and the family grew. In 1874, four-year-old Johanna and two-year-old Pieter were followed by Willem Frederik; in 1877, Louis Cornelis was born. The digs next to the school were now, in addition to being perpetually damp, too small and crowded, but living conditions were of less importance to Pieter Mondriaan than was his ever-hardening faith. The will to survive with only the most rudimentary personal comforts was at the core of the beliefs with which he ruled his young family and that had a strong following within his expanding sect.

Pieter Mondriaan became increasingly involved in political activities. In 1871, a preacher who was a prominent Dutch theologian and editor of the in 1872 founded daily newspaper *De Standaard*, Dr. Abraham Kuyper, had taken over the leadership of the Orthodox Protestants from Groen van Prinsterer, a parliamentarian and founder of Protestants politics. Kuyper believed that church and state must function in tandem, and in 1879 would found the Anti-Revolutionary Party, closely connected with "de Gereformeerde kerk". Kuyper, who would, from 1901 to 1905, be prime minister of the Netherlands, was originally an ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed Church, the dominant religious movement in the Netherlands, from which the Orthodox Protestants had substantially broken away even while retaining membership in it. As a consequence of his university training, at first he had been theologically liberal and progressive, but this changed when he served in his first parish, in Beesd, a fishing village in the north. The local people were Calvinists, but not of the most ardent strain, and in trying to educate them, he came to consider them "backward" and "ignorant," for being out of sync with the times in which they lived. Kuyper was 'converted […] to a living faith in Jesus Christ as Lord.' He became a vocal devotee of a more rigid brand of Calvinism, which he was convinced would improve the lives of these unsophisticated fishermen and their families, and of other Dutch people as well.[84] Pieter Mondriaan, two years younger than Kuyper, learned of Kuyper's beliefs and determination to promulgate them. He founded a branch of the Anti-

[84] Irving Hexham, 'Christian Politics according to Abraham Kuyper', in: *CRUX*, XIX(1983)1, p. 2-7.

Revolutionary party in Amersfoort to advance the new cause spearheaded by the minister he deemed heroic.[85]

Pieter Mondriaan wrote Kuyper, 'I am convinced that sitting idly when there is work to be done […] is an abomination to the Lord. That is why I adhere to you. It is because of your work, your incomparable individuality in the intellectual field.'[86] His branch of Kuyper's political party, like the school for members of the Orthodox Protestants sect, would, he hoped, strengthen Kuyper's following. Pieter Mondriaan succeeded in enlarging party membership, both in town and the surrounding region. Mondrian's father participated in the leadership of Kuyper's movement nationwide, with its religious and political sides progressing in tandem.

Abraham Kuyper and Pieter Mondriaan endorsed a strict, emphatically moralistic belief system that took Calvinism to its extreme. Increasingly certain that the Dutch Reformed Church was too liberal, Kuyper endorsed practices that fit more into the rubric of "Neo-Calvinism," advocating rules based directly on the gospel John Calvin had preached in the sixteenth century. The emphasis was on the role of God and of divine grace in every act of life. Kuyper declared 'Oh, no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over *all*, does not cry: "Mine!".'[87]

For Kuyper, the universe was continuously in the process of re-creation through God's acts of grace. Pieter Mondriaan, who embraced that belief wholeheartedly, did his utmost to imbue it in his children. His oldest son, more than any of the others, would devote his life to that re-creation connected to a larger spiritual force. And Mondrian would echo his father's all-encompassing immersion in his faith.

#

That belief—that every day is an occasion of birth and creation, that some sort of universal force exists, and that balance and equanimity are possible—would govern Mondrian's existence. The positive, life-endorsing elements of Abraham Kuyper's thinking, which was central to the way Pieter Mondriaan brought up his children, had a lifelong impact on the artist.

The more repressive elements of the arch Calvinism which Pieter Mondriaan actively proselytized to students and family alike, would, however, play out differently in his oldest son's life. When Mondrian would

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[85] Wim Scholtz, 'Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan senior', in: C.A.M. Gietman [ed.], *Biografisch Woordenboek Gelderland* (2002)3, (http://www.biografischwoordenboekgelderland.nl/bio/3_Pieter_Cornelis_Mondriaan_senior).

[86] Letter PC Mondriaan Sr. to Abraham Kuyper [1873], as quoted in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.

[87] Abraham Kuyper, 'Sphere Sovereignity', in: Bratt, James D., *Abraham Kuyper. Modern Calvinist, Christian Democrat*, Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids MI 2013, p. 488.

dance to the latest jazz, it was not simply a slight straying from his father's rules, but a flagrant violation. If, as many people assume, he had sex with female prostitutes, or, as others claim, he had sex with other men, he violated the tenets of Orthodox Protestantism ever more fragrantly.[88] Whether he would commit his "travesties" with indifference or as conscious acts of rebellion, Mondrian did not believe that the faith in the sanctity of everyday life, the spiritual force which resides in every blue rectangle or black line or white wall, required abstemiousness and self-denial. Unnecessary hardship was not concomitant with consuming love.

Mondrian would always be the product of his upbringing, but, while intensely spiritual in his own way, he would not adhere to a Christian concept of God or to a Protestant code of behavior. The forces he worshipped were timeless and universal. His language did not come from the Holy Bible, but from metallic tubes of oil pigment. He was an ardent practitioner of Kuyper's idea that there was a spiritual force "in every square inch of existence" – that no element should be cordoned off from any other – but that force had nothing to do with either Jesus Christ or Calvinist restrictiveness. He would realize his father's and Kuyper's notion of re-creation, but in a form beyond their wildest imagining. Despite Mondrian's fealty, in a new form, to their essential beliefs, his work would garner neither their understanding nor their approval.

Still, Mondrian would adhere to aspects of the code instilled in others by his father and Kuyper. One dressed correctly, but not flamboyantly. As an avant-garde artist, he would wear his well-pressed dark suits when in society, and don an immaculate smock for working. He would speak his mind with quintessential Dutch forthrightness; to conceal his views was as out of the question as it was for his forebears. He would become a worldly cosmopolite, at home in the most sophisticated milieus, but he never exhibited an iota of pretentiousness. Mondrian rejected the repressiveness

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[88] Conrad Kickert is one of the people who assumes Mondrian had sex with female prostitutes. See Marty Bax (a.o.), 'De passies van Piet Mondriaan', in: *Jong Holland. Tijdschrift voor kunst en vormgeving na 1850*, 10(1994)2, p. 35. There are two stories about Mondrian's alleged homosexuality. The first one is about a fight with a homosexual man from Amsterdam who visited Mondrian during his stay in Uden in 1904. This story is told by Van den Briel in a letter to J.M. Harthoorn, [no date], as cited in Herbert Henkels (ed.), *'t is alles een groote eenheid, Bert. Piet Mondriaan, Albert van den Briel en hun vriendschap aan de hand van brieven, documenten en fragmenten bezorgd en van een nawoord voorzien door Herbert Henkels*, Joh. Enschedé en zonen, Haarlem 1988, p. 74-75. A more definitive assertion that Mondrian was homosexual was the testimony by Mrs. Van der Hucht, head nurse of nursing house where Aletta de Iongh lived. Mrs. Van der Hucht said that Aletta de Iongh told her that Mondrian, like De Iongh's husband, was homosexual. See notes by Evert van Straaten from February 22 1994 in the A. De Iongh archive at the Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

of the world that nurtured him, yet adhered to its rigor in order to embrace life. Kuyper's notion that restrictions and a self-imposed discipline facilitated one's ability to see and celebrate "God's acts of grace" was intrinsic to Mondrian's being.

#

Pieter Mondriaan wholeheartedly subscribed to Kuyper's political credo as well as his religious doctrine. Young though his children were, he made it part and parcel of their upbringing. It was based on "sovereignty in own sphere."[89] *Soevereiniteit in eigen kring* placed equal value on what it identified as the main sectors of human existence and determined that each should have its own authority, and be controlled from within. The realms included, among others, religious worship, the press, educational institutions, the legal system, agriculture, business and industry, domestic life, and the arts. Each was sovereign unto itself at the same time that each was part of the supreme order created and ruled by God.

In this movement which Pieter Mondriaan championed, everything in life had to be done according to certain rules, no matter where the authority lay. The rules concerning domestic life addressed issues as personal as sexual positions and adultery. The standards for the arts allowed for individual expression within proscribed confines, but what counted consistently was *coram Deo*: the belief that each sphere has an independent life in which it complies directly with God's laws.

As long as organizations responsible for each field based their management on faith, they were to be supported in equal measure by the government. The central role of religious belief, which deliberately repudiated both the French emphasis on individual rights and the priority of state rights accorded by the mainstream of German thought, was beyond question. Service of God and the perpetuation of holiness counted above everything else.

VI

Under the monarchical system that Kuyper and Pieter Mondriaan advocated, the House of Orange would assume its rightful place at the helm of the Dutch people, as ordained by long-established historical and religious links. These stalwart citizens considered it up to the royal family, as leaders of the state, to uphold the morality of the nation at large. Kuyper and Pieter Mondriaan had a clear image of the structure that would facilitate the maintenance of an orderly social structure under monarchical supervision. Various professional groups, including those connected with the arts, were to be represented in the country's Senate. The father of each household was

[89] This translation, which may seem akward, is used because it most closely approximates the Dutch original 'Soevereiniteit in eigen kring'.

to have the sole vote for his family in electing the senators and other government officials.

Today we can easily picture the milieu in which Mondrian was raised, because of its parallels in the "Bible Belt" of the U.S. The mix of evangelism with politics that dominated his childhood would have a direct impact on America's New Christian Right, whose 'leaders on both left and right trace their political thought to the work of …Abraham Kuyper.'[90] In 1898, at the Princeton Theological Seminary, Kuyper would deliver the Stone Lectures, which were published that same year as the book *Calvinism: six Stone-Lectures* and which he considered a summation of the views he had developed when he and Pieter Mondriaan first joined forces.[91] These lectures are considered 'the roots of the contemporary evangelical political movement' in America.[92] Their publisher—Höveker and Wormser Ltd. in Amsterdam—was a small firm headed by that same friend of Pieter Mondriaan's who, in this closely knit circle, housed Mondrian for three years when Mondrian, at age twenty, moved to Amsterdam to attend art school.

Kuyper's main premise is that 'No man has the right to rule over another man.'[93] He amplifies: if one individual were allowed to be stronger than another, it would mean that we are not equal before the Lord. When Kuyper summarizes the application of Calvinism to politics with his 'three theses', he articulates views that would later underlie Piet Mondrian's attitude toward individualism and authority. While the future painter of *Broadway Boogie Woogie* would have no interest in the role of government or state institutions in enforcing the notion of sphere sovereignty, Kuyper's and his father's emphasis on pervasive ordering forces superior to any of us individually, would be his lifeblood. And their evangelical ardor would be second nature to him.

Kuyper's three theses are:

> 1) God only - and never any creature - is possessed of sovereign rights, in the destiny of the nations, because God alone created them, maintains them by His Almighty power, and roles them by His ordinances.

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[90] Hexham, *Christian Politics*, p. 2-7.

[91] The "Stone Lectures" in Princeton Theological Seminary were delivered in the autumn of 1898 by Dr. A Kuyper, of the Free University of Amsterdam. About ten days before the lectures were to begin, Dr. Kuyper sent his Dutch manuscript and asked that it might be translated for his use. The translated text was then set in type at Princeton, and the printed sheets provided to Dr. Kuyper for use in the rostrum. Before the Lectures were issued to the public in English (published by among others: Höveker & Wormser, Amsterdam [c.1899]), the text was much altered by Kuyper himself.

[92] Hexham, *Christian Politics*, p. 2-7.

[93] Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-Lectures*, Höveker & Wormser, Amsterdam [c.1899], p. 103.

> 2) Sin has, in the realm of politics, broken down the direct government of God, and therefore the exercise of authority, for the purpose of government has subsequently been invested in men, as a mechanical remedy.
> 3) In whatever form this authority may reveal itself, man never possesses power over his fellow man in any way other than by an authority which descends upon him from the majesty of God.[94]

Kuyper goes on to extol the 'sovereignty of the individual person,' while declaring concomitantly that 'conscience is never subject to man but always and ever to God Almighty'[95] He maintains that 'liberty of speech and liberty of worship'[96] are essential in a just society, even if he believed that only 'mature men' warranted such liberty, and that it should be denied to 'backward people.' His wish for a way of life that enabled 'every man to serve God according to his own conviction and the dictates of his own heart' pertained directly to the way that Mondrian would devote his life to the benefit of humankind with a form of art that was his singular invention.[97] The mature Mondrian would be less wholehearted about Kuyper's caste system and his emphatic deism, but he was unequivocal in his belief in a person's power to go his own way while advancing a sense of universal beauty.

Even if Mondrian's style of life as a bachelor in Paris rather than a family man in the Netherlands would differ strikingly from his father's in the details, the values he absorbed as a child would remain in his absolute faith in a system of rules for living. His everyday conduct was in concord with his artistic standards. He would subscribe to, and write encomia about, the notion that no part of life is separate from any other. He embraced the view that the balance and careful regulation and clarity requisite in painting are equally essential in human comportment and in the relations one maintains with all other people. He made rationalism his credo, and would have his father's tunnel vision even if he went to music halls and spontaneously planted powerful kisses on women not expecting them.[98]

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[94] Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 103.
[95] Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 139.
[96] Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 141.
[97] Kuyper, *Calvinism*, p. 142.
[98] Harry Holtzman told the following story: 'One night in New York, we were returning home from a party in a taxi, with Peggy Guggenheim sitting between us. An old friend and admirer of Mondrian, Peggy was an uninhibited woman to say the least. Peggy leaned her head on Piet's shoulder, snuggling close to him. Piet put his arm around her, and after a moment he bent his head and kissed her mouth arduously and long. "Why Mondrian!" she exclaimed in seeming astonishment. "I thought you were so *pure*!" After we dropped her off at her house, Mondrian was delighted: "They"—meaning the Surrealists—

Like his father, Mondrian would give complete priority to ideology. The way Pieter Mondriaan devoted himself to neo-Calvinism was echoed in the priority Mondrian accorded to artistic creation. It took him a while before his sense of purpose would subsume everything else in his life, but friendship and personal pleasure, initially on a lower tier anyway, would in time be relegated to a position of complete irrelevance. Family life, travel, charitable work, politics: while all of them attracted Mondrian before he moved to Paris in 1912, from then on, except for a single one occasion when his obsession with the much younger woman threw him completely of course, he let nothing from the "outside" interfere with his work. What would matter about the two world wars when he found himself in their midst was their impact on his studio time. Once he was a public figure, he was apolitical.

VII

Shortly after meeting Abraham Kuyper, and writing articles propagandizing the new movement for *De Standaard* and the *Amersfoortsche Courant*, Pieter Mondriaan realized that words alone were not adequate to convince a broader audience of the credo he felt would be their salvation. He turned to visual imagery. He carved plaques with historical and religious themes, and in about 1878 bought a small lithographic press to make prints of the evangelical images he was crafting into his relief sculpture.[99]

Pieter Mondriaan had complete conviction, almost as strong as his faith in God, that visual art could be used to transport its viewers into another realm of existence. The educator/artist with his fever-pitch belief in himself and his religion embraced art as a vehicle for persuasion and transformation. What the devout headmaster produced in his damp house in Amersfoort looked nothing like the abstract compositions which, half a century later, his first-born son would create with the intention of transporting people into another sphere of being, but Mondrian's father made art as the earnest expression of one's personal gospel part of the family make-up well ahead of the time that Piet Mondrian put up those rectangles of pure color on the white walls of his studio on the rue du Départ. Pieter Mondriaan's use of visual art to promulgate his religious and political beliefs would, above all else, have a direct effect on his namesake.

Pieter Mondriaan's lithographs had the specific goal of propagandizing the political and moral messages of Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer. The

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Peggy was then married to Max Ernst—"*they* always call me *pure*!"', in: Akiyoshi Tokoro, *Mondrian in New York*, Tokoro, Tokyo 1993, p. 66.

[99] 'I have bought a small litho-press for 30 gulders […]', letter Pieter Mondriaan to Abraham Kuyper, April 16 1878, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 151.

prints inked in fine black lines on white paper illustrated important events in Dutch history; those in the reverse technique—where what is drawn appears white against a black background—represented biblical themes. That method used for the religious scenes makes them appear nocturnal, so that they belong to the realm of eerie, other-worldly occurrences, while what is depicted in the more traditional prints appears to have taken place in the light of day, as if reported in newspaper photos.

In those historical prints, Pieter Mondriaan focused on the proclamation of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 1813 and the role of the Royal Family in the pivotal time period that led to the creation of the Dutch constitution in 1815. He illustrated the Union of Utrecht, the death of William the Silent, and the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina in 1898 (Fig. 1). To show these key moments of Dutch history, Pieter Mondriaan followed a popular pictorial formula. He positioned the main characters in the center and surrounded them by a sequence of scenes that narrate the story in question. He then linked the disparate elements with garlands and other decorative flourishes festooned with flags and crests, and added captions and verses. Adhering to this style of historiography which went back to the sixteenth century, he then meticulously embellished the scrollwork with over a dozen little cameo portraits of historical figures. Painstakingly, like someone fearful of stopping his work or even catching his breath, he kept jamming in all this imagery and decoration. He did not leave so much as a square centimeter of calm interlude.

Fig. 1. PC Mondriaan Sr., *Gedenk- en Feestplaat bij de kroning van koningin Wilhelmina*, 1898

The God-fearing souls in the cameos drawn by Pieter Mondriaan were, even in that time period when a lot of people knew the details of their national history, identifiable only to the most diligent scholars or ardent patriots. Yet even if most viewers did not, and do not, know who these heroes of the Netherlands' past are, what is clear is that the men and handful of women portrayed are all hard-working, self-sacrificing characters. Uniformly dour, enduring considerable physical discomfort in their starched white shirts and black jackets, these socially and politically conservative stalwarts of virtue have all the qualities Mondrian's father considered essential to serving God and the Netherlands. Presenting these noble characters, he intended to teach the world at large the same values as those he consistently preached at home.

His son's eventual passion for large expanses of uninterrupted white can be seen as a reaction to that overstatement. Mondrian would replace his father's encyclopediac frenzied imagery with ambient calm. Wheras Pieter Mondriaan could not stop proseletyzing, Mondrian encouraged the luxuriance of pure snowy space. But in both instances the artist was supremely conscious of the viewer, and determined to communicate effectively.

VIII

Pieter Mondriaan had neither aesthetic judgment nor the slightest inclination to restraint. He also had no imagination. To declare the glory of the Netherlands and the perfection of God, he simply used a visual language that was tried and true for the general populace—and blasted it through a megaphone. The approach was successful. Devotees of his religious and political viewpoint lapped up the lithographs. Newspapers gave them to subscribers; schools bought them in bulk. Some of the images were made into postcards that would be widely distributed for years.[100]

The success of his father's lithographs taught Mondrian in his early childhood that by making pictures, not only you could express your deepest convictions, but you might find a paying audience. Art was a marketable commodity. If it appealed to the general taste and fulfilled a known demand, even though you might not become rich from it, it was potentially lucrative.

On the rare occasions, when, as a young artist, Mondrian emulated his father, the consequences were among his few really weak pictures. In general he would, from the start, make work totally unlike Pieter Mondriaan's, even when it meant disaster on the marketplace. We will see what happened on the occasion when they collaborated. But even if he mostly avoided his father's style, the son would follow in his father's footsteps in pouring out his heart in his art. In his case, it would be with his art alone. Mondrian

[100] For the distribution of these lithographs, see: Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 65.

would depend on visual imagery to reveal a tenderness and passion he exhibited in no other way.

#

Once he became an abstract painter, Piet Mondrian's most successful art would be the opposite of his father's. Even as it evokes a visceral response, its impact defies explanation, and it belongs to a non-verbal realm. Color and line, space and rhythm, are both the means and the goal. In Pieter Mondriaan's work, everything depends, instead, on narrative content. The means of expression is flowery, the style diffused rather than concentrated as it would ultimately become in his son's hands.

The illustrations with which Mondrian was nurtured are like long Sunday school classes in which the teacher lectures with merciless verbosity. These dense scenarios packed with historical busts and pictures of pictures are instruction manuals on how to feel reverent. In one lithograph, a Medusa's head symbolizes the dreaded forces of revolution, utterly heinous in Pieter Mondriaan's representation, while the central scene is a paean to the prosperity offered by the House of Orange as the source of a unity for the Netherlands.[101] Another contains portraits of a cast of characters that includes, among others, Groen Van Prinsterer and Abraham Kuyper themselves—along with their great mentor John Calvin—and a written text with the command "Fear God and honour the King."[102] That was the mantra of Mondrian's childhood; it could never be said too frequently or too fervently. Mondrian's father taught his wife and children to prize the Dutch monarchy and the teaching of the New Testament more than anything more immediate to their own lives.

The biblical themes Pieter Mondriaan elucidated in white-on-black include the "Annunciation to the Shepherds" (Fig. 2) and the "Adoration of the Three Kings."[103] Like the historical illustrations, these are crowded scenes, packed with a profusion of detail, but when the subject pertains to God, the pictures have an evangelical fury that makes the House of Orange lithographs orderly and restrained by comparison. A kneeling shepherd spreads his disproportionately long arms like eagle's wings; his elongated fingers are pointed and splayed so that his hands resemble claws. He is bent on the humblest of knees, the bare soles of his feet calloused and bruised to make clear that he has walked long and hard through the dirt. Pieter Mondriaan dramatizes his supplication to the maximum.

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[101] P.C. Mondriaan, *Feestplaat ter nagedachtenis aan Neerlands Onafhankelijkheid 1813-1888*, 1888, lithograph 42x55 cm.

[102] P.C. Mondriaan, *Revolutie of Evangelie*, 1874, lithograph 85x74 cm.

[103] These are part of four pictures illustrating episodes from the Nativity, all four signed with PCM, 50x70 cm.

Fig. 2. PC Mondriaan Sr., *De verkondiging aan de herders*

In these religious pictures more than the historical ones, the germ cells of the future art of Pieter Mondriaan's toddler son are evident. The shower of holy light, invoked by a profusion of long straight rays, would be echoed, between 1900 and 1912, in a number of breast-beating images our Mondrian would paint of young women in a state of emotional transport. Later, in his more refined abstract work, Mondrian would continue to manifest his father's instinct to bring light into the world and show reverence, even though with a sensibility completely different from Pieter Mondriaan's work. Psychologically and spiritually, the son would follow his father in his wish to imitate creation, and in his tribute to higher powers—specifically the force embodied by the sun. Pieter Mondriaan presented the most clichéd version of the sun's rays, whereas Mondrian would actually create light rather than draw its imitation, but the son shared his father's goal of evoking luminosity. While Mondrian shows the light that comes from within—as opposed to the light emanating from its single source and shining onto something else, as his father did—immaterial brightness was an elixir to both of them.

#

Pieter Mondriaan had one area of taste that had nothing to do with story-telling and narrative. He was passionate about flowers. The schoolmaster drew a plethora of carnations and roses and mums, rendering each blossom in impressive detail, pressing them against one another in wreaths and garlands. Occasionally, he arranged them in overflowing bouquets of the sort that appear on caskets as the grandest send-off to the afterlife; as with everything Pieter Mondriaan did, he avoided understatement as if it were a crime, and blasted his point.

It is almost certain that, as soon as our Mondrian was old enough to draw, his father taught him the technique for these botanical images.[104] Eventually, he would apply this knowledge in a very different way than his father did. Mondrian would concentrate on single stems, completely devoid of accompanying foliage, individuated so as to seem, each of them, like human persona. Some of the flowers would be budding, others in full blossom, and a few wilting toward their deaths. Having learned from his father how to draw and how to use some of the tools and materials of his craft, he would go his own way with the training, but his father gave him his start.

Pieter Mondriaan used his flowers purposefully. They added force to his instructional illustration; he did not consider visible beauty a sufficient goal in and of itself. Nor did he regard the making of pictures as a proper profession. When art stated his case, it was worthwhile; beyond that, it was frivolous. Moreover, in spite of a certain capability, he lacked the talent to go further. A competent draftsman, he knew better than to venture into color. But he taught his son how to draw, and would, at a pivotal point in his son's life, invite him to paint in the colors of which Pieter himself was incapable.[105] It was a generous paternal act, making all the stranger, years later, Mondrian's insistence that his father stood in his way.

IX

On May 30, 1874, Pieter Mondriaan sent Groen van Prinsterer one of his historical lithographs. The schoolmaster accompanied the print with a letter. It began, 'Dear Sir, Were the sole purpose of that to which I have the honour to draw your attention to provide proof of the gift of drawing with which the Lord has endowed me, I should not have the temerity to submit this work.'[106]

The combination of unctuousness, false humility, and grandiosity in that letter are what his wife and children had to contend with all the time. And his inflated self-image did not allow for him to praise the people around him. While Pieter Mondriaan lacked the talent he claimed God had imbued

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[104] Mondrian's own statement: '[I] first practiced drawing under the guidance of [my] father, who was very involved in [my] activity'. Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, [n.p.].

[105] Herbert Henkels, *Mondriaan in Winterswijk. Een essay over de jeugd van Mondriaan, z'n vader en z'n oom.*, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 1979, p. 28-30. Cf. Welsh, *CR* I, p. 151: 'Henkels has convincingly argued that Mondriaan Senior doubtless supplied the overall iconography and specific motifs […] but that the execution in oil could only have been done by Mondriaan Junior.

[106] Letter PCM to Groen van Prinsterer, May 30 1874, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.

in him, he would never proffer his children the sort of praise he accorded himself. Yet, in the years to come, he would still nurture his oldest son's skill, with a degree of pride.

The blustering Pieter continues his missive to his mentor: 'At my unforgettable school in the Nobelstraat I learned long ago to contemplate the History of our Fatherland as far as the sources and my strength permitted.' His obsequiousness borders on parody; he goes on to say that he felt encouraged 'to hope—albeit not for all parties—that you will be glad that the development of a pupil at the aforementioned school into a teacher has borne at least a little fruit'. All of this is a build-up to his explanation of why he is giving Groen the lithograph: 'In the silent hope that I have been able to contribute to the well-being of the people so dear to your heart, I have the honour—with the assurance of my gratitude for what I received during my education—to dedicate to you the enclosed copy, which has not yet been published. I take this liberty in the conviction, shared with me by all, that in both the art and the history your original mind (your greatness, if I may say so) will see more than a simple student and enthusiast.'[107]

Groen van Prinsterer responded to all of this gush in a way sure to deflate Pieter Mondriaan. The religious leader started complimentarily, but quickly shifted tone. 'The Historic Picture […] does you credit. The plan and the execution seem excellent to me. […] Nonetheless I must beg you not to rely solely on my approval in this matter. Leave me out of it entirely. To my mind your picture, with its memories of the past, glorifies the present too much; the representation is too much a kind of apotheosis. Amidst the exaggeratedly jubilant tones too little heed is paid to da Costa's words: "Be true!" […] That is what I have to tell you. I must not be insincere.'[108]

Groen van Prinsterer's candid insistence on bare-bones honesty surely was exemplary to both father and son. It mattered more in life than hyperbole, and the belief that absolute truthfulness in one's art was the essence of morality in one's life, would never be forgotten.

#

The rebuff did nothing to stop Pieter Mondriaan from trying to forge his way ahead in the arch conservative movement with which he was desperate to ally himself. When one of his lithographs was advertised and featured in Abraham Kuyper's newspaper, *De Standaard,* the text of the ad declared its reverential purpose: 'The very idea of erecting a historical monument to Groen van Prinsterer's motto: The Gospel Against Revolution, is a splendid one.'[109] The advertisement informs its readers that 'Since 1813 our national institutions have been descending toward the revolutionary path.' It follows

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[107] Letter PCM to Groen van Prinsterer, May 30 1874, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.
[108] Letter Groen van Prinsterer to PCM, June 3 1874, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.
[109] *De Standaard* January 2 1875, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 149.

that dire pronouncement with a declaration of new hope. 'From the old historical stem a young shoot has sprung.' That young shoot, blessedly, 'perpetuates ancestral tradition […] expressed in a rich […] allegory […] grouped around the bust of our beloved King who stands above all parties.'[110]

This is only a small part of the text. Like the print itself, the ad goes on and on, full of repetitions and gratuitous material, most of it difficult to fathom. The senior Mondriaan's son's will to simplify and distill his art and life would be a case of one generation being diametrically opposite the previous one. Yet our Mondrian would never get past his father's repetitiveness and intense wish to push an agenda that causes a believer to forget that there are moments when it is best to halt the preaching.

Yet their messages differed even if their intensity was the same. Mondrian's father considered aesthetic pleasure worthless; enjoyment in itself was decadent. Without its loftier purpose of educating people, and delivering a sermon, art was beside the point. Mondrian grew up in a household where pictures were tools of evangelism. Pieter Mondriaan wrote Kuyper, 'The Picture must conquer!'[111] The goal of anything he created was to convince people of the correct way, in religion and politics.

It was with conquest in mind that Pieter Mondriaan made drawings on the classroom blackboard or with white chalk on black cardboard. In a very different way, he succeeded on this level as much as with the lithographs that were reproduced in such profusion. The schoolmaster's impromptu cardboard art, which he used in his teaching, was so impressive that, years afterwards, his former students would still talk about the vivid imagery with which he illustrated historical and biblical events before their eyes.[112]

When, in Mondrian's teenage years, Pieter Mondriaan was adamant that his namesake train as a teacher instead of a painter, he did not, after all, say "businessman" or "banker." In his own case, he saw art and teaching functioning in tandem, and the idea of instructing was more important than entertaining, in the way a painter of still-lifes for domestic consumption would. In Dutch society at the end of the nineteenth century, fine art was, in fact, an acceptable, respected profession that could yield a dependable income, but to someone like Pieter Mondriaan, it was a decadent pursuit. Besides, Pieter Mondriaan was competitive. It must have stung him that his

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[110] *De Standaard* January 2 1875, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 149.
[111] Letter PCM to Kuyper, January 28 1874, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 150.
[112] In a letter to Sal Slijper, Carel Mondrian mentions his father's drawings for children in white chalk on black cardboard. In this letter, Carel also refers to a newspaper item in the *Winterswijksche Courant* from November 27 1945, which refers to Senior being famous for drawings on cardboard. Letter Carel Mondriaan to Slijper, January 20 1946. RKD, #0150, inv.nr 133. Carel Mondrian also told Seuphor about Senior's much admired drawings on blackboard, see: Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 44.

hero Groen van Prinsterer, the founder of his new faith, was so harsh about the drawings with which he had hoped to make a favorable impression. It was also tough to be good enough to make splendid blackboard drawings but not to create more lasting art. Pieter Mondriaan, bitter at his own shortcomings, may well have wanted to prevent his son surpassing him.

Yet he would, we will discover, give Mondrian more support and endorsement than Mondrian later allowed. The tidy notion of a jealous and competitive father, and a mother too docile to do anything about it, became, at the artist's instigation, the prevalent myth. It has appealed to a number of writers about Mondrian, and conforms conveniently to a biographical cliché of many great artists.[113] But it is equally possible that we are in a situation, like that of Mondrian's friend Simon Maris, where a father was not displeased to see his son carry on the artistic tradition. Even if Pieter Mondriaan is said—and the word "said" is operative here—to have wanted Piet to teach rather than practice art full time, there is plenty of evidence that he not only encouraged him to develop as an artist, but was proud when Piet outdid him by coloring in a major work for which the father was commissioned. For all the appeal of the myth of the challenging, unsupportive parent, this may have been the rare case of a father happy to see his son go a step further. None of it is black and white. Rather, as with most fathers and sons, alongside the competitiveness, there was a wish for the older generation to see the younger one flourish.

X

The Orthodox Protestants in Amersfoort could not afford their own place of worship. They prayed at the same large church as the rest of the Dutch Reformed. The makeshift school on the Kortegracht was a sort of haven for the Dutch Reformed and Christian Reformed sects. With its two classrooms separated by a thin wooden wall, the annex where the family lived, and nothing more, these headquarters of these devout neo-Calvinists were relatively primitive. The other schools in town, where pratctioners of other branches of Protestantism, or Catholics or Jews, went, were larger and had full playing fields; a small recess area constituted the entire grounds of Pieter Mondriaan's meager facility.[114] Still, it attracted numerous families. A

[113] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 46: 'But the young Mondrian felt no call for the career of a teacher. He wanted to be a painter, an artist. Of course, this could only involve him in painful skirmishes with his father. But the boy would not give in'. Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 215-216: 'Ze hadden wel hard en onverzoenlijk tegenover elkaar gestaan […] toen zijn vader doorkreeg dat zijn oudste zoon kunstenaar wilde worden. […] Toen bleek dat Piet van schilderen en tekenen zijn beroep wilde maken, deinsde zijn vader terug. Hij was bezorgd of zijn zoon daar wel de kost mee zou kunnen verdienen.'

[114] Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 12.

hundred and ten students had showed up when it opened, and by the time Piet was born, the student body had swollen to a hundred and fifty-nine.[115]

Pieter Mondriaan had to teach day and night. He also had to fundraise; unlike other local schools, this one received no government support and, even with families paying tuition, it was short of the money it needed to operate. Pieter Mondriaan sought donations all over the Netherlands. He had prodigious energy, for at the same time that he taught all those children and traveled around to ingratiate himself with members of Kuyper's new sect wherever he could find them, and to solicit their contributions, he served as a private tutor to the upper echelons of Amersfoort society. The rich people to whom this erudite import from The Hague taught French as well as Dutch history sent their coaches and drivers to pick him up at the family's modest digs and ferry him to their splendid houses. The schoolmaster was delighted to be welcomed into these fancy circles, even in his slightly servile capacity.

One of these circles was that of Wassenaer van Obdam, wealthy scions of the oldest noble family in the Netherlands, whose most famous ancestor was a lieutenant-admiral who had died gloriously in 1665 in the Second Anglo-Dutch War.[116] This link to the Dutch aristocracy made Pieter Mondriaan immensely proud. When, in 1950, Carel Mondriaan, Piet's youngest brother and the source of much of the information about the family's early years, spoke with Salomon Bernard Slijper—a lifelong associate of Mondrian's, twelve years his junior, who bought a lot of the early work, and became something of a Mondrian authority—Carel emphasized Pieter Mondriaan's association with Van Obdam and other aristocrats as one of the greatest distinctions of the family history.[117] The importance accorded to noble lineage suited the schoolmaster's anti-revolutionary politics. That sense of hierarchy, and the values places on blood lines, were further aspects of Mondrian's childhood that he would ultimately reject. But the example set by his father—of living modestly and working long hours, for saking personal comfort and denying himself frills in life—was vital to his oldest son. For Mondrian, it would be second nature to sacrifice comfort to his cause.

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With the popularity of his school and the demand for his tutoring, Pieter Mondriaan became a local hero in Amersfoort. Following his arrival there

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[115] Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 14.

[116] Early in the Second Anglo-Dutch War, the Dutch navy suffered a bloody defeat in a savage battle fought off Lowestoft, June 13 1665. Jacob Wassenaer van Obdam was the admiral who had the task of leading the large Dutch fleet to attack the English in their home waters. The admiral got killed when his flagship exploded.

[117] Letter from Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, October 18 1950, in: RKD #0150 inv.nr. 138.

in 1869, he was something of a cult figure, with his young family basking in the glory of his position even as they had limited material niceties.

The schoolmaster had constructed his life, and that of his wife and children, with the singular goal of making the new school on the Kortegracht a bastion for devotees of the Orthodox Protestant. They were consumed by their ardor for the new faith and its concomitant politics; Pieter Mondriaan's co-religionists felt immeasurably supported by the small but powerful institution to which they brought their children every day. Then, in 1878, the dream was shattered. That year, a petition was drawn up opposing denominational education in the Netherlands. After some eight years in Amersfoort, Mondrian's father became embroiled in a conflict that undermined all his hard work.

The idea of a school entirely for practitioners of the New Reformed Church of the Netherlands was the basis not just of what Pieter Mondriaan had achieved on the Kortegracht, but also of the sectarian schools he and Kuyper were trying to promulgate nationwide, of which it was to be a shining example. When both Houses of Parliament acceded to the demands of the petition by passing a bill which would impose stricter rules on single-religion schools and deny them all future financing, while improving the funding of state schools, Kuyper's and Pieter Mondriaan's entire project ground to a halt.[118]

Piet, age six, and his eight-year-old sister were old enough to feel their father's anguish and the sudden uncertainty of the entire family's existence. Yet hope remained. A large number of people continued to support what Pieter Mondriaan and Kuyper and their minions were trying to do. All proponents of single-religion schools united and it was for the first time in Dutch history that both Protestants and Roman Catholics became allies. On May 2, 1878, a petition signed by over three hundred thousand Protestants and more than one hundred and fifty thousand Roman Catholics, was handed to King Willem III in Loo Palace. The document with its pages upon pages of names requested the King not to sanction the new bill even though Parliament had passed it.[119]

The King announced his personal support for this second petition, but at the same time he declared himself a stickler to the rules of democracy. He made clear that he could not countermand the constitution, which accorded a parliamentary majority ultimate authority in such matters; it was, he recognized, his obligation to sign the bill in spite of his own opposition to it. Once the new law went into effect, there was no point in Pieter Mondriaan's remaining in Amersfoort.

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[118] The so called 'Schoolwet van Kappeyne'.

[119] P.Th.F.M. Boekholt & E.P. de Booy, *De geschiedenis van de school in Nederland. Vanaf de middeleeuwen tot aan de huidige tijd*, Van Gorcum, Assen/Maastricht 1987, p. 214-216.

Pieter Mondriaan's sense of personal defeat overwhelmed him. Disappointment turned to anger. At the same time, Abraham Kuyper, while he was no less upset, was determined to move forward. By no means could they give up on a cause which they believed affected human destiny. The service of their Almighty God had to continue. The outpouring of support for their point of view gave them reason to hope that the Anti-Revolutionary Party and Orthodox Protestantism might still flourish independently if they could organize their many champions. After all, over three hundred thousand people had signed the petition.

With full-fledged denominational education now denied financial support from the government, however, Pieter Mondriaan needed to find a new institution where he could teach his beliefs, even if it meant that not everyone in the school community would be an Orthodox Protestant who adhered to the views of Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper, always a bit less rigid and more accommodating than his hidebound acolyte, helped him to become headmaster at the School for Christian National Education in Winterswijk, a rural town at the German border.[120] Mondrian's father was relieved to have a job and some hope. But he also felt that he was being relegated to as remote a point in the Netherlands as one could find. He was not wrong.

[120] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 147.

Winterswijk

I

De Achterhoek—the name of the region in the Netherlands of which Winterswijk was one of the largest and oldest town—means "rear corner." Surrounded by relatively primitive farms and woodland, Winterswijk was a world apart, isolated within a region that was itself far from everything. Although the Netherlands is relatively small, even today, with transportation far faster than when the Mondriaan family lived there, it still feels distant, requiring four trains with three prolonged waits during the changes to get there from Amsterdam.

The Achterhoek is in form like a protrusion on a jig-saw puzzle piece that clips into the void of an adjacent piece. Jutting out from the main body of the Netherlands, the area is surrounded by Germany on three of its four sides. Winterswijk was in its character typically Achterhoeks. The young family felt as if they were being relocated to a different country when they moved to the town of seven thousand and six hundred people with its Jacob's church from the late Middle Ages.

But even if the schoolteacher with his young family was bitter at the necessity of being so far away from all that was known to him, at least he had a good job and could continue to promulgate the principles of Groen van Prinsterer in which he believed so deeply.

#

Having resigned from his position in Amersfoort on April 13, 1880, Pieter Mondriaan had his family installed in their new outpost by the time he was installed as headmaster on April 19. Piet had turned eight the month before. He and his sister were old enough to glean the strong message implicit in their father's situation and his decision to relocate: life revolved around one's beliefs and goals for humankind, not one's personal convenience.

In the face of defeat, one had to be capable of moving on. To Pieter Mondriaan, the location of one's home was inconsequential compared to his capacity to advance his cause. It was essential to find the circumstances that made it possible to promote his spiritual values to the greatest number of people, and if Johanna might have preferred to bring up her own young family closer to The Hague, where most of her and his families were, that was beside the point. Neo-Calvinism was all that counted.

That emphasis on faith was not the norm in the largely liberal politics and materialistic culture of late nineteenth-century Netherlands.[121] To the

[121] H.T. Velde, *Gemeenschapszin en Plichtsbesef. Liberalisme en Nationalisme in Nederland, 1870-1918*, Sdu Uitgeverij, Den Haag 1992, p. 12: 'Na 1848 regeerden de liberalen niet voortdurend, maar verwierven zij wel doorslaggevende invloed in de politiek en gingen zij het sociale en intellectuele

majority of Dutch people, success at a money-making job was the priority for most everyone in the Mondriaan's milieu, whether the goal was to be a sales person in a modest shop or the director of one of the new gigantic breweries or shipping companies that was then transforming everyday life. Mondrian grew up in a household where the priorities, rigorously maintained, were as unusual as they were absolute. Starting in early childhood, he did not expect to be like most other people, any more than his parents were in the mainstream.[122]

#

In spite of its hardships, the move to distant Winterswijk brought some unexpected advantages. The father and mother and four children were given, as a perk of Pieter Mondriaan's new job, a wonderful, large house from which they faced a lovely landscape. It would not be long before the rural surroundings inspired the oldest son to draw and paint.

Again, Mondrian and his siblings were in a different situation from the other children they knew. Their father did not go off to some other location to work. The family's home and Pieter Mondriaan's workplace were no longer in the same building, as they had been in Amersfoort, but there was only a schoolyard between the large and spacious dwelling and the institution where Pieter Mondriaan was the new headmaster. As a grown man, Mondrian would, similarly, live where he worked and have a seamless existence rather than one organized like most people with a job and the rest of life as separate poles.

The house on Zonnebrink, one of the grandest thoroughfares in town, was at odds with the other mansions on the street the way that the Mondriaan family's life was different from everyone else's. The entrance was on the side, with the front door on the schoolyard, opposite the school

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leven domineren.' Cf. Remieg Aerts, *De Letterheren. Liberale cultuur in de negentiende eeuw: het tijdschrift De Gids*, Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1997, p. 13: 'Liberalisme is altijd meer geweest dan een staatskundige richting en een economisch stelsel. Het politieke en economische vormen slechts aspecten van een ideologie die het vertrouwen in vrije ontwikkeling op elk gebied tot kern heeft. […] Dit maakt het liberalisme tot een allereerst cultureel fenomeen.'

[122] For late 19th century materialistic culture, see: Auke van der Woud, *De Nieuwe Mens. De culturele revolutie in Nederland rond 1900*, Prometheus – Bert Bakker, Amsterdam 2015, p. 286: 'De komst van de nieuwe cultuur betekende een conflict met de oude beschaving; de kerkgenootschappen speelden daar een belangrijke rol in. Ze waren de hoeders van de christelijke waarden en normen […] Na 1850 werd dat steeds minder vanzelfsprekend […] De aanval op de christelijke waarden kwam vanaf het midden van de negentiende eeuw van drie kanten: van het materialisme, van het atheisme en van het nihilisme.'; p. 290: 'Abraham Kuyper […] voelde in 1898 dat de bevolking bezig was de godsdienst de rug toe te keren. Hij zag een materialistisch, naar genot hunkerend volksleven […] op niets dan geld, op genot en op sociale macht is dit streven gericht.'

entrance across the way. With everyone else on the block having front doors facing the street, the Mondriaan family's residence was a declaration of Pieter's role as headmaster. The intertwining of domestic and professional life was clear to see. The head of the household could come or go from his work at any hour of the day or night; his role was service to the community. His children were special, and different, for their father's life was intrinsic to the school just a few meters away and to everyone else associated with it. Piet and his sister and their brother Willem immediately entered that school, and while their classmates came at a distance from farms in the outlying region or flats over local shops, their walk was so brief that they did not even need to put on coats in blizzard weather. 'One witness can still recall how […] the Mondrian children invariably arrived at their father's classroom in pairs, in complete silence and with eyes front, which was an attitude they were expected to maintain until the class was over and the other children had already left the room.'[123] Later in life, it would not occur to Mondrian to question the integration of his profession with how and where he partook of everyday needs and pleasures; it had always been that way.

#

Unlike the house where Mondrian was born, the house in Winterswijk, where Mondrian spent far more time than in Amersfoort, was, along with the schoolhouse across the way, privately owned when I went there, although today they constitute a Mondrian museum.[124] Fortunately, the proprietor of both, at the time of my visit, Elisabeth Nijhuis-Wiggers, is a woman who embraced its importance as the place where one of the greatest painters of the twentieth century spent his formative years, which is why she saw to its preservation and creation as a museum. She and her late husband, without being enslaved by the history of the house, preserved certain aspects of it so that it still provides a vivid impression of the circumstances of Mondrian's youth.[125]

When Mrs. Nijhuis-Wiggers showed me around, I was immediately struck by the sheer grandeur and luxury of the dwelling. It is very much The Headmaster's House, conferring importance on its inhabitants by being even larger than the school building it faces. However pleasure-denying and Calvinistic the family was, Mondrian grew up with a sense of privilege and well-being. It makes perfect sense that his art would always reflect the bounty in which he was nurtured, even if he subsequently would live in circumstances of personal hardship.

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[123] Robert P. Welsh, *Piet Mondrian's Early Career. The "Naturalistic" Periods*, Garland Publishing, New York & London 1977, p. 6.

[124] Date of visit was May 4 2010.

[125] For some history of the house, including floor plans, see Wim Scholtz, 'Tweemaal Mondriaan en het Mondriaanhuis', in: *Jaarboek Achterhoek en Liemers* 9(1986), p. 101-115.

In a part of the Netherlands where the summers are warmer and the winters tougher than in Amsterdam, the headmaster's residence was built to assuage the impact of both seasons. It had large windows that open easily in hot weather, and a good heating system—dependent on coal stored in the basement—that made it highly comfortable even in the cold wet weather that afflicts the eastern Netherlands from November through March.

Built in 1869, the house is a square, ten meters by ten meters, impeccably divided inside. Its perfectly balanced shape and the formal precision with which the windows are organized lend it a sense of harmony that you intuitively perceive as you approach the front door. Once you are inside, the neat proportions have a soothing effect, and imbue a feeling of equilibrium. The aura of propriety, of a life governed by rules, with which the dour Pieter Mondriaan and the agreeable Johanna brought up their family, was reinforced by this well-regulated geometry, and in the symmetry of the spacious, high-ceilinged rooms—all broad rectangles, neither too long nor too narrow—arranged with consummate logic in the overall square.

The house into which the headmaster and his wife and four small children moved had initially been built as a one-story structure. The second floor and the large third floor attic were added in 1875. But when the Mondriaans arrived, the aggrandizement had already occurred, and if the new family home was not quite a mansion, it was substantial and cushy. When Pieter and Johanna Mondriaan and their young children walked into the place where they lived, they crossed a large foyer with a marble floor. Dark, shiny wood surrounded them. On the far side of the front hall, there was a steep staircase with an ornate newel post and a handsome, carved banister, their varnish glistening. Wide paneled doors to the left and right opened to large rooms that were sheathed in wooden wainscoting below and white plaster above. The room to which the substantial entrance way opened on the left was a fine sitting room with a fireplace that gave onto a large library. To the right of the vestibule there was another big room that must have been intended originally for dining, but that the Mondriaans used as a playroom. The ample scale of the sitting room/library and the playroom invited a sense of ease and everyday enjoyment that contradicted Pieter Mondriaan's teaching.

The kitchen was at the back of the house, behind the playroom. It had ample space for food preparation and family meals. It and the playroom were the two rooms where the children and their mother spent most of their time together, while the more formal spaces were used for meetings between Pieter Mondriaan and his fellow Neo-Calvinists, or for him to read by a fire once his long work day was over.

The handsome staircase that faced the front door led to a floor with four bedrooms of about the same size, high-ceilinged and airy. Each was a square within the larger square of the house's footprint. They had large windows, and white plaster walls, the only darker tone coming from the wooden floors and a wooden closet door. The bathrooms were spacious. The floor above

had a roomy attic of full height. Throughout the house, what today may seem unexceptional represented a high standard of living for the time period, the comforts surprising in a culture that allegedly discouraged any form of hedonism.

#

If you picture where Mondrian spent most of his childhood and formed most of his expectations of everyday life, and where his future memories were born, his subsequent decisions became all the more remarkable. Mondrian grew up in a mansion, even if it was one that came with his father's job. It made his own life choices that much more dramatic. His happy willingness to spend most of his life in modest studio spaces has new meaning when one stands on the marble floor of the grand foyer on Zonnebrink. One of the most noticeable features of the places where Mondrian elected to reside was the decrepitude of their entrances. Visitors to the rue du Départ were invariably astonished by the stairs and hallway like those of a run-down tenement. Even when they walked past the front door with its peeling paint and entered Mondrian's visually remarkable living space, the creature comforts were negligible.

In Winterswijk, one understands what the artist readily gave up. To cook on a two-burner hot plate was a major change for someone whose childhood house had a large iron stove, capacious ovens, and ample supplies of firewood and coal to keep them going. The house in Winterswijk took the sting out of daily life; the studio apartment in Paris, as well as his subsequent dwellings, accentuated it. Not only had the artist emphatically rejected life's conveniences, but he forsook solidity for ethereality. The studio on the rue du Départ, compared to Mondrian's massive childhood home, resembles a sailboat on the open sea. It was flooded with light—from a skylight as well as from a studio window—in a way that was never true inside the fortress on Zonnebrink. On the rue du Départ, everything shimmered against the plain whiteness of the walls. The furniture was minimal, a table nothing but the simplest thin top on narrow and tapered squared wooden legs, devoid of ornament, painted white, seemingly weightless. Clothes hung in a cubby behind a partition, not in a real closet. There was not an iota of anything extra. With the sole exception of the living room sofa and mattress on the bed, every surface was brittle.

But Mondrian in his later life was not doctrinaire; he was not the scion of an upper echelon family deliberately gone native to make a statement. He had not rejected what he knew; he simply created something else. He was not a monk; nor was he a moral judge rebelling against his childhood luxuries and conspicuously opting to sleep on a coarse mat. That sofa with its ornate curved back and red upholstery material was like a statement of the need for ease and enjoyment, both of which Mondrian believed in. There was, similarly a single flower in a vase, prominently placed.

That large blossom, however, was made of white plaster. Kertész was obsessed with the presence of this strange object which so strongly suggests

beauty embalmed. It exudes a sensuality which is oddly elusive and inaccessible. Simultaneously splendid and frightening, this neutral flower, not simply artificially but solid and heavy, was a personal and completely original statement. To most visitors, it embodied Mondrian's eccentricity. Why have a flower at all, if it was to lack any hint of life? Why rough, matte plaster rather than the smooth porcelain? Was this there for his own pleasure, or to make a declaration? Why was it so oversized? Did Mondrian create it himself? Was it in some way a comment on growing up in a cushy environment in the flower garden of the world—think of Holland's fields of tulips—and having chosen a third floor garret in a squalid building in the wilds of Paris instead?

It was in the large house in Winterswijk that this exceptional artist on the rue du Départ noticed everything and began to define himself.

II

Even though the Mondrian family had all those amenities, they did not have fun. There was somber atmosphere in the solid two-story structure on Zonnebrink. The headmaster's house was sufficiently larger than the neighboring houses to confer importance on the family inhabiting it, and Pieter Mondrian's stature in the most archly Calvinist Protestant circles added to their dignity, but while the large dwellings built in the same era by Dutch merchants and bankers fostered "the good life," this one inspired piety. Its architecture and decoration were dead serious, as if the bricks and mortar carried the message of Pieter Mondriaan's credo of Christian holiness and individual sacrifice. The cubic form imposed a dour rigidity, while the ornate cornices and heavy-handed decorative relief work inside were as thunderous as the most ardent of Calvinists at the pulpit.

Besides deliberately forsaking the creature comforts of his childhood, Mondrian would be determined to give up this heaviness and pomp. Pieter Mondriaan had proudly put his family in a physical structure which declared his importance. The hefty moldings and fireplace mantels inside the house all announced prominence in the world. The ornament that embellished them, while having nothing to do with their function, served to invoke powerful cultures of the past, the civilizations ruled by the historical figures who appeared in Pieter Mondriaan's lithographs. Neither natural nor manmade materials were treated as being sufficient in themselves; wood and plaster had to be covered with swirls and curlicues. Everything referred to something else. Mondrian would reject all of it. He deplored the self-importance, the focus on the surface rather than the core of things, and the visual gratuitousness, and sought their alternative. For a relative pittance, he would create a living and working environment that was simple, light, and merrily blunt.

#

There was one aspect of the house on Zonnebrink, however, which penetrated Mondrian's being as if entering his DNA. This was the grid formed by black lead mullions in the large windows. Eventually, Mondrian would, it seems to me, echo both the structure and its opening to the luminous universe beyond in his abstract art. Making paintings that represent nothing but their purest selves, he, too, would use vertical and horizontal black lines meeting at precise right angles to contain immaterial light and color.

The crisscross window structure may have been irrelevant to Mondrian's later work, or it may have been an essential seed. It is the same as in windows all over the world: a rudimentary and intelligent solution to the issue of supporting panes of glass. Arranged in a taut grid, the narrow strips, organized like the lines of demarcation on a tic tack toe board, do not have an iota of decoration. In some places the mullions are made up of wood or iron; they can be in varying colors; the glass can be in vertical rectangles or even hexagons or octagons. In the Mondriaan's house, they are matte black lead, to support stacked rows of squares of marvelously clear hand-blown glass. It is the same splendid glass, as pure as water in a mountain stream, that lets light into the Netherlands' sixteenth and seventeenth-century churches. These windows do their job impeccably. Unlike so many elements of the house, they have no aspect alien to their purpose. They enable lots of light and oxygen to enter the living space in the most straightforward way possible (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3. Photo of stained glass window
at the Mondrian house, Winterswijk

Going from window to window on the first floor of the house on Zonnebrink, is like looking at the future. Thin and crisp the undecorated mullions were clearly the seeds of the dividing lines of Mondrian's great abstract compositions from 1912 onward. Most of Mondrian's black verticals and horizontals would vary, albeit subtly, in width, but his grids

would have the tautness and precision of these lead lattices in Winterswijk. Surely young Piet, looking at the windows, and beyond them to the outdoors, felt their imprint. The purity of their unadorned straightness, the trustworthiness of the squares they established so elegantly, grabbed him. He must have absorbed the way that these window grids have the irregularity of molten lead formed by the human hand, in service of a mechanical correctness. For he would repeat their achievement time and again, in hundreds of variations: the enclosing of whiteness with blackness, the locking in of light and color grid that positions it rigidly and permanently, while palpably applied by the hand of a caring, vulnerable human being, each brush stroke betraying an engagement and effort of utmost intensity.

#

The idea that these windows had such an impact on Mondrian is based only on visual evidence. But it makes sense to consider that the grid of black lead mullions through which, starting at age eight, young Piet viewed the outside world, gave him his balance. It was the rare avatar of logic in an otherwise confused hodgepodge of forms. How direct these straight horizontals and verticals were. How refreshing to see something with its appearance integral to its purpose. The leading was the germ cell of the straight lines that later obsessed him to such an extent that for weeks on end he would alter and revise their widths, adding half a centimeter to the girth of a vertical or reducing a horizontal by a mere ten millimeters.

He imbibed the decisive and effective way that these matt black strips enclose and simultaneously release light and the color which is produced by light. What was solid enabled the ethereal to thrive. To give weightlessness a sturdy structure was an act of alchemy worth perpetuating.

III

The distinction in their new community accorded his children by Pieter Mondriaan's position would later affect the ease with which Mondrian would be an outsider. Having the schoolmaster as their father set the three boys and their sister apart as clearly as their house did. This was a hierarchical society. Treated with slight disdain by the aristocracy and merchant class, while respected as a notch above by the local farmers, Pieter Mondriaan's offspring did not fit in with one particular group, and never expected to. Their parents brought them up to feel obligated to work hard, and by no means to take their privileges for granted; they also emphasized moral purpose as essential, rather than incidental, to one's existence.

Pieter and Johanna Mondriaan had, at least for the time being, settled into a good situation. By the end of the year in which they had moved to Winterswijk, a fourth son, Carel, was born. The family was now complete. The parents and their children were healthy enough except for Piet's unusual

number of colds. Winterswijk was hospitable to the Reformed Church, and it seemed that the Mondriaans' existence was now securely established.

Additionally, on June 14, 1880, two months after the Mondriaans had moved into the house on Zonnebrink, the direct connection between their new hometown and Germany was forged. A new railway line from Zutphen, a small Dutch city forty kilometers from Winterswijk, to Winterswijk and on to Gelsenkirchen, a city in the German Rhineland, was completed. This momentous event that transformed a formerly isolated spot into a transportation hub demanded elaborate celebrations. That evening, church bells rang in abundance while profuse fireworks exploded in the evening sky.[126] The splashes of bright multi-colored light accompanied by the simultaneous cacophony coming from the steeples were unlike anything eight-year-old Piet had ever seen or heard. Sight and sound acquired new dimensions. The dazzling sparks and triumphant ringing demonstrated the power of artistry to make exuberance displace the usual dourness of everyday life.

That metamorphosis was inextricably associated with train travel. In Paris, Mondrian would live near a bustling railroad station. There, too, the straight lines of tracks, the mechanical energy, and the decisiveness of modern engineering could be felt in the air as means to link and unify disparate groups of human beings.

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Pieter Mondriaan taught the basic subjects in which he had been trained at the Protestant teachers' college, to which he added French and drawing. Mondrian got his start at both in his father's classes. The schoolmaster also continued to produce his lithographs of historical and religious subject matter and to conjure biblical scenes in chalk on the blackboards of the Winterswijk School. Later in life, after his retirement, he began to write and publish short stories as well.[127] That will to achieve in different directions was a model for his namesake.

In theory, the different way of life into which they had settled in the large house surrounded by tall, lovely trees on De Zonnebrink offered a splendid future. Shortly after the move, however, Pieter Mondriaan began to go through a personal crisis. A few months following the family's arrival in Winterswijk, he offended his new constituency by skipping the Sunday church service on more than one occasion. His absence appalled the congregants who counted on the headmaster of their religion-based school to worship without fail.[128]

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[126] *De Standaard* 17 juni 1880.

[127] Mondriaan Senior edited books from French and German, for instance: Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan [naar Alphonse Levray], *Onder de leiding Gods*, J.M. Bredée, Rotterdam [1902]. Also: Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan [naar Gaston Bonnefont], *Het kerstgeschenk des keizers*, J.M. Bredée, Rotterdam [1903].

[128] See: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148; Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 24.

Then Pieter Mondriaan began applying for other jobs. He did not manage to secure one, but the word got out. The people who had hired him and brought him to Winterswijk were furious.[129] Pieter Mondriaan, however, had one major supporter of his initiatives to realize the most rigorous level of Calvinist practice. The Winterswijk mayor, the Baron Theodoor Mackay, who had been in office since 1874 and was *the* pillar of local society, had befriended him when the family moved there, and remained staunchly loyal. Even if he had estranged himself from Kuyper and offended members of the congregation, Pieter Mondriaan was saved by Mackay's championship. Then, in 1883, in the Mondriaans' third year in town, Mackay decided to relocate himself in The Hague in order to enter national politics. His move was a turning point for Pieter Mondriaan. Once his most important ally had left, he retreated more into himself. And rather than realign himself with the power structure of the Orthodox Protestants, he distanced himself even further from his former compatriots.

Mondrian's father was losing his bearings. Where previously he had been ambitious, he became paralyzed. He completely lost his former will to move ahead or make changes in his life. Several job offers came in from other locations—precisely the sort of positions he had eagerly sought two years earlier—but he had become entrenched in his way of life in Winterswijk regardless of his reduced effectiveness. He could not face moving elsewhere and uprooting the family again. Winterswijk offered a stability that mattered more than all the hindrances to promulgating his beliefs.

One of the positions proposed to Pieter Mondriaan would have made him a figure of national importance. In spite of their differences, Kuyper had asked him to replace him as editor of the *De Standaard*, the influential newspaper that was a vehicle of neo-Calvinism.[130] Kuyper felt that Mondriaan essentially had the right views, and showed a good writing style in his pieces in various weekly and daily newspapers. Mondrian's father declined the offer, and also said no to the chance to become a laboratory assistant at the Free University in Amsterdam. Pieter Mondriaan wrote Kuyper declaring himself a 'schoolman' for whom the only way to feel at home was by teaching at a large primary school.[131] He had set the limits with which he would define himself for the rest of his life.

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In Mondrian's early childhood, the family had lived in the shadow of a patriarch fired by absolute convictions and a steely will to impose his religious and political beliefs on as many people as possible. Now, on the

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[129] Letter Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan to Abraham Kuyper, August 16 1880, partially quoted in: Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 60-61.
[130] Henkels, *Mondriaan in Winterswijk*, p.18.
[131] Letter Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan to Abraham Kuyper, August 29 1882, quoted in: Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 106-107; also partially translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.

brink of adolescence, the scion of the family had a very different experience. He witnessed his father's transformation from zealot to depressive. The loss of verve and consequent retreat cast a pall on the household. At the age when he was developing more of his own identity, the teenage boy could not helping being affected by the shattered confidence within a man previously determined to change the world. His father became both defiant and sad.

Even while he might have been said to enjoy a certain success as headmaster of the School for Christian National Instruction, and, at least there, enforce his strict Calvinism, and oppose secularism vehemently, he openly repudiated the religious practices of the majority of Winterswijk's townspeople. His resolute negativity isolated not just him, but the entire family.

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And when Pieter Mondriaan could not get his constituency to adhere to his beliefs, he went his own way at a price. When government authorities required that every child in his school have vaccinations, the headmaster, a staunch opposant of these shots to prevent disease even if everyone else complied with the call for them, withdrew his own children from the institution he headed.[132] It's one thing to be the oddball at school when you are a teenager, but another to have your father, the head of the institution, require you and your siblings to stay at home. Not only was it awkward and embarrassing, but Mondrian appears to have suffered consequences to his physical health too. Mondrian would lifelong be beleaguered by endless colds, bouts of pneumonia, flus, and sinus problems. His health difficulties would seriously impair his productivity. One wonders if all would have been different if his father had let him have the shots, and whether, when Mondrian, in Paris and London and New York, was obsessed with this or that diet, he thought about this. Mondrian would become as rigid as his father about issues of what one took into one's system, with each regime contradicting the previous one. Whatever his belief of the moment was, he would adhere to it obsessively. Like most sons, he made himself as different from his father as possible while also elulating him. His sheer sense of celebration would completely contrast his father's grimness, but he would resemble his father more than he realized.

IV

Pieter Mondriaan imposed his iron will on family life with quirks that other people noticed and commented on. It was normal for fathers to reign over their families with absolute authority, but his domination took odd forms. The citizens of Winterswijk were struck by the schoolmaster's 'habit of

[132] Welsh, *Mondrian's Early Career*, p. 6.

leading his offspring in a prearranged order in Sunday walks through the village, while mother Mondriaan remained at home in the kitchen.'[133] The regimentation conformed to the values Abraham Kuyper had codified in his book *Antirevolutionair óók in uw Huisgezin* (*Antirevolutionary also in your own Family*).[134] Published in 1880, Kuyper's doctrine primarily addressed the roles of husbands and wives.

A wife's primary function was service as a good mother. As such, she attended to all details essential to a well-oiled domestic milieu, and accepted her role as second in command. The father of the family who made all important decisions, kept his distance. The mother served as an intermediary between her children and their father. This structure, in early years prevalent throughout Dutch society, but which had evaporated in many Dutch households, was essential to Orthodox Protestantism, whose proponents proudly contrasted it to the decadence that prevailed in the current era. Kuyper writes, 'families such as those whom one encounters so often nowadays, in which the wife has become number one and her husband is subservient, are sinfully composed families […] going against the word of God […] A man who lets his wife be the boss at home is not just cowardly and unmanly; […] but he is in direct contravention […] of the will of God […]. He simply has no right to do that. [..] But since God saw fit to say to women: "your will shall be subject to that of men!", it is proved once and for all and in the most categorical manner that the Lord God has entrusted part of his divine might over the wife to the husband, who thus rules over the family according to the will of God.'[135]

Michel Seuphor, whose account is a blend of what he presumably heard from Mondrian directly with information he got from Carel after Mondrian's death, writes, 'The father was a strict Calvinist. Not particularly narrow minded, yet he was not inclined to take moral questions lightly. Or to compromise his paternal authority. [. . .] It seems that Piet had much affection for his mother. But we know very little about her.'[136]

It is true that it is difficult to parse together much information about Johanna Mondrian, but Piet's relationship to her, begs for further investigation. Seuphor follows his comment on the lack of information about Johanna by asserting 'We usually know very little about the mother of a family.'[137] It is a strange notion, so far-fetched that we wonder why

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[133] Robert P. Welsh, 'Catalogue Raisonné of the Naturalistic Works (until early 1911)', I, in: Robert P. Welsh, Joop M. Joosten, *Piet Mondrian. Catalogue Raisonné,* (3 dln [in 2 bnd.], V + K Publishing, Blaricum; Inmerc, Paris: Cercle d'Art, 1998, p. 143.

[134] A. Kuyper, *Antirevolutionair óók in uw Huisgezin*, J.H. Kruyt, Amsterdam 1880.

[135] Kuyper, *Antirevolutionair*, p. 45-47.

[136] Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, p. 44.

[137] Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian*, p. 44.

Seuphor imposed it on the story. Fortunately, another source, obscure but immensely helpful, has emerged on Mondrian as a child and young man.

#

This is an unpublished manuscript called 'Mondrian's personality', written by Mondrian's lifelong friend Albert van den Briel, with whom Mondrian lived in close proximity for over a year when the artist was in a period of retreat.[138] There are two versions of Van den Briel's typescript, each about fifty pages. He wrote the first at the request of Robert Welsh, a scholar who was one of the greatest of all authorities on Mondrian and who wrote the first volume of the catalogue raisonné of Mondrian's art, which covers his art and life through 1911. Van den Briel wrote the second draft thinking the first had been lost, but it was subsequently found. They both cover roughly the same ground, although with some interesting differences between them at the moments when Van den Briel addressed delicate subject matter with more of a will to avert scandal the second time around.[139]

Regardless of those alterations, Van den Briel seems a trustworthy source on Mondrian, and imposes nothing of himself. A sympathetic human being, nine years younger than Mondrian, he wrote about Mondrian and the ancillary cast of characters in a kind and balanced way. The only person he portrays negatively is a man who spread a rumor of having had a homosexual relationship with Mondrian when the artist was thirty. Van den Briel's account of the man's visit to Mondrian during the year when he—Van den Briel—and Mondrian were living together, and the variance between his two tellings of it—is remarkable in many ways, and we will get to it, but for now we look to Van den Briel for his presentation of Mondrian's childhood.

Whatever element of Mondrian's life his friend describes, he does so not so much because he cared about art, but because he liked the man so much for his integrity and his fragility, and was content to serve as Mondrian's acolyte and aide-de-camp. This was the sort of relationship Mondrian preferred. There was no competitiveness. Rather, Van den Briel was happy to devote himself to Mondrian's well-being in service of a hard-working

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[138] Albert van den Briel, 'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid', manuscript (RKD Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Den Haag, Archief Robert Welsh, 0632). It has never been published in its entirity, but parts (about a fifth) of the manuscript have been published in: Herbert Henkels (ed.), *'t is alles een groote eenheid, Bert. Piet Mondriaan, Albert van den Briel en hun vriendschap aan de hand van brieven, documenten en fragmenten bezorgd en van een nawoord voorzien door Herbert Henkels*, Joh. Enschedé en zonen, Haarlem 1988, p. 43-58.

[139] According to Henkels, the first manuscript had originally been written for J.M. Harthoorn (a collector) in the 1960's. Subsequently, Van den Briel made it available for the scholar Robert Welsh. The second version would be the one Van den Briel made especially for Welsh in 1967. See Henkels, *Groote eenheid*, p. 43.

person, singular in his wish to better the world, who very clearly needed the support of other people.

#

The two met in Amsterdam in 1900. Nineteen-year-old Albert van den Briel was then training to be a doctor, and twenty-eight-year-old Piet Mondrian was trying to survive as a painter by undertaking portrait commissions and painting the sort of landscapes people wanted in their homes in order to be free to experiment with paintings connected to Theosophy. In 1903, Van den Briel precipitously abandoned his medical career, and, hoping to resolve a personal crisis concerning his identity, decided to become a forestry expert. He moved to Brabant, a rural area in the south of the Netherlands. Later that year, Mondrian also, abruptly left Amsterdam and, at Van den Briel's bidding, move to Brabant as well, with the intention of remaining there for the rest of his life. Living in nearby villages, the two men always spent weekends side by side, and dined together on at least one week night, usually Wednesday. It was in the course of 1904 that Van den Briel became an expert on Mondrian's life up to that date. Mondrian, having exiled himself from the Amsterdam art world, and more comfortable with the honest forester than with his fellow painters, opened up to his young friend about his childhood. Although he shifted course and returned to Amsterdam at the start of 1905, and Van den Briel eventually married and had a family, they remained close friends for many years.[140] Once Mondrian left Paris in 1938, their communcication would dwindle to the occasional brief letter, but, following Mondrian's death in 1944, no one knew him as well as Van den Briel had.

In addition to Van den Briel's two handwritten narratives, Robert Welsh's archive, now in The Hague, also contains many letters Van den Briel wrote Welsh.[141] What interested Welsh was primarily any information that shed light on the dating of individual paintings in his catalogue raisonné of Mondrian, but for a biographer, the nuggets are the specifics of Mondrian's youth. They greatly increase our knowledge of his psychological formation. The forester was idiosyncratic, subjective, and affected by the gap in time between his living together with Mondrian and his writing about his exceptional friend over forty years later, but his text is still a gold mine.

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Van den Briel depicts Pieter Mondriaan as a tough task master for his young family. Starting at age eight, when Mondrian and his brothers came home from school every day, they were made to work in the garden. (Their sister

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[140] About their friendship: 'Ik ben blij dat je zoo dicht bij me ben[t] gekomen: 't kon ook niet anders, we waren altoos één. Ik geloof nu nog meer dan vroeger.', letter Piet Mondrian to Albert van den Briel, [undated] 1925, in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 11.

[141] RKD Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Den Haag, Archief Robert Welsh, #0632.

was exempted, presumably to help her mother in the kitchen.) Mondrian detested the tasks and the lack of choice about doing them. He found weeding tedious, and resented hoeing and digging. His obligation to do them deprived him of the chance to play or read or go off with other children, and he loathes the labor to tend the soil and what grew in it.

Mondrian spoke about this often to Van den Briel in Brabant. The house where Mondrian lived in the village of Uden had a large garden. 'Mondrian never did a thing in it,' Van den Briel writes, 'owing to memories of being forced by his father to work in the garden. By then he was 32 years old. Throughout most of his life Mondrian needed a fair amount of time to get over difficult and unpleasant events, especially if they reminded him of his father. He always loved his mother dearly, and it was especially for her sake that he continued to visit his parental home from time to time.'[142]

Pieter's and Piet's relationship was not even 'cordial' according to Van den Briel. Pieter was so 'embittered by the disagreements with Abraham Kuyper' that his misery cast a pall on family life.[143] When the unhappy father forced his sons to pick up gardening tools or pull weeds for hours on end rather than cavort with their friends, the boys felt his mix of disappointment and rage as an integral part of their outdoor chores. It seems to me that Mondrian's antipathy to the natural world later in life, his famous unwillingness to be seated at friends' dining tables in a position from which he could see trees through the window, his avoidance of the countryside or even of urban parks—and his consequent complete absorption in wholely geometric abstraction, devoid of organic form—had its origin in that anguish. Yet his solution was the most celebrative form of victory imaginable; he converted his dislike of garden work into feasting on the beauty he could create and fine-tune according to his own will, rather than in his father's yoke and according to the caprices of rain and cold and other uncontrollable elements.

V

Comparing the misplaced but subsequently found version of Van den Briel's text with the rewrite, we see that, while Mondrian's companion essentially repeated what he had already said, he made a few slight additions. Version 2 depicts Mondrian as vehemently anti-semitic.[144]

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[142] Albert van den Briel, 'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1), manuscript, RKD Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Den Haag, Archief Robert Welsh, #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[143] Van den Briel, *Mondriaan's persoonlijkheid (versie 1)*, #0632, inv.nr. 1.

[144] 'Opvallend is dat M een duidelijke antipathie had ten aanzien van joden. Zoo is hij nooit op vriendschappelijke voet met zijn huisbaas en buurman kunnen komen die jood was.' And 'In Laren […] sprak M[ondrian] zelfs van "die verdomde jood", toen Sl.[ijper] lang was blijven zitten toen ik er was.'

This anti-semitism is hard to believe and there are no excuses for the "you have to see it in the context of the time period" theory. Mondrian's views are impossibly out of character for the intelligent and rational person he seemed so far. Besides, Sidney Janis, himself proudly Jewish, had spoken warmly of his close personal friendship, which did not tally with the virulent anti-Semitism that is the only negative trait Van den Briel ascribes to his old friend.[145] Though there is more evidence of Mondrian's ugly prejudice; at least up until the time of his move to Paris in 1912. The reason to raise the subject when looking at Mondrian's childhood is that Van den Briel maintained that the reason for Mondrian's anti-Semitism was that he was secretly part Jewish on his mother's side. Given that Pieter Mondriaan and his fellow neo-Calvinists considered the Jews to be the murderers of Jesus, the idea that his wife's ancestors included Jews and that their blood was in his children would have added to the strife of family life.

Van den Briel's writing that Johanna was part Jewish does not mean she was but Van den Briel got the idea from Mondrian himself. No other Mondrian authority even mentions the possibility. Hoping to determine if Van den Briel was correct about Mondrian's mother's background, I worked with a genealogist. The genealogist merely provided a family tree that is basically a chart of names going back a few generations in which some of the names could be, but are not necessarily, Jewish. According to this genealogist Mondrian had no Jewish ancestors.[146]

It matters whether Mondrian was or was not partially Jewish only because, according to Van den Briel, that element in his own make-up had a significant impact on him. Besides being a factor in Pieter and Johanna's marriage and in the atmosphere of the household, it was, Mondrian's closest companion claimed, the root of Mondrian's virulent anti-Semitism. Even if Van den Briel was incorrect in stating that the former Johanna Kok had Jewish blood—information that Van den Briel embellishes by saying that Mondrian 'looked Jewish' as did his mother, while none of the other children had anything semitic in their appearance—Mondrian voiced his prejudice too many times, and in too many ways for us not to give serious

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Albert van den Briel, 'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2), manuscript, RKD - Nederlands Instituut voor Kunstgeschiedenis, Den Haag, Archief Robert Welsh, #0632, inv. nr. 2.

[145] Sidney Janis (1896-1989) was a trend-setting gallerist and art dealer in New York after WWII. He bought his first Mondrian painting (B239) from the artist in Paris in 1932. Conversations of the author with Sidney Janis, 1970's and 1980's.

[146] The Mondrian family tree was discussed in: J.G.J. Reussien, 'De geslachten Mondriaan en Mondrian, in: *Gens Nostra. Maandblad der Nederlandse genealogische vereniging*, 50(1995)11, p. 529-551. The genealogist from Centraal Bureau voor Genealogie said there are no Jewish ancestors in Mondrian's family tree, traced back to c.1750. Email from Yvonne Prins (CBG), December 8, 2010.

consideration to the validity of what Van den Briel says.[147] Mondrian did not make digs at any other nationality or religion; I don't think he would have cared so much about Jewishness if he was not aware of it in himself. This strikes me as the reason he went out of his way to denigrate as Jews any number of important people in his life, including his first major patron, Sal Slijper, and his landlord in Brabant, and his early Parisian gallerist Léonce Rosenberg.

Mondrian's sense of himself as Jewish would also be basis for his eventual need to make art that was truly non-sectarian. Even though he chose to be a member of a church congregation in Amsterdam, he may never have felt a hundred percent at home there, and while he was intensely spiritual, and as a young artist would make Christian imagery central to his art, he soon avoided any association with all sectarian religious groups, aligning himself only with Theosophy.

Van den Briel and Mondrian regularly spent long evenings together, three or four nights of the week, throughout 1904. The topic to which they returned above all others was religion, which often preoccupied them until the early hours of the morning. Mondrian read and analyzed both the Old and New Testament. It is hard to dismiss the idea that Van den Briel had gleaned from Mondrian himself the idea that the artists had some Jewish ancestry.

VI

In Amersfoort, the first drawings Mondrian ever saw were the pictures Pieter Mondriaan would draw for the children's Christmas parties. In Winterswijk, his father continued to use white chalk on cardboard to draw images of the Holy Manger, Simeon in the temple with Anna, and the Flight into Egypt.

Mondrian himself never referred to this skill of his father and the pleasure his impromptu sketches brought the local children. As the second oldest child, he had more direct experience than the younger three boys did of their father's seasonal outpouring its success, since Pieter Mondriaan stopped teaching when they were all quite young, but it took the baby of the family, Carel, to report on it.

Two years after Mondrian's death, when a handful of devotees were suddenly scrambling to find out what could still be learned of the recently deceased artist's past, Carel would be the main spokesman. Not only did he

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[147] For instance, in a letter to Theo van Doesburg, Mondrian wrote: 'I got to know two Russian Jewish girls, raised in Holland. One of 21 and the other one is 16. So their age is convenient but Jews always have something repulsive.' Letter Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, May 25 1922, RKD #0408, inv.nr. 139.

describe these lively illustrations, but he also evoked the happy ambiance in which they were seen. These images rendered in white on black and depicting the story of Jesus's beginnings 'were intended as decorations for the parties, where sandwiches, coffee and cocoa were served, and the children were given books.'[148]

Even if he never chose to recall this happier side of his youth, those circumstances had an impact on the teenage Mondrian. In a milieu where it was unusual to have fun, and daily life was dominated by the grind of studies and chores, here he experienced art as the transmission of a joyful spiritual message in salubrious conditions. The pleasures of those Christmas parties—conviviality, food that was something other than the everyday porridge and soup, the receipt of books (which in turn opened up unknown territory)—were inextricably linked with the creation of new art works. Art brought with it a rare and wonderful feeling of celebration.

VII

Winterswijk was suitably named.[149] From early November through late March, gray skies prevailed even in the few hours of so-called daylight. Cold drizzle or rain alternated with snow. There was not much laughter to be heard inside the house across from the school. Pieter Mondriaan's glum moods intensified following Mackay's departure in 1883, when Piet was eleven. The schoolmaster became more aloof, distancing himself from the religious community and antagonizing his former confreres in its leadership. The directors of the school, meanwhile, were aghast at his increased rate of absence from church services.[150] Pieter Mondriaan's disagreements with Kuyper were also intensifying. Both of them were more orthodox than the majority of Winterswijk residents, which is why they had left the Dutch Reformed Church, which they deemed too lenient. Yet even if Pieter Mondriaan philosophically sided with Kuypers's staunch Calvinism, for unknown reason he wanted nothing to do with the sect Kuyper formed in 1886 and, in 1892, named "Reformed Churches in the Netherlands." Not only was Pieter Mondriaan without allies, but former supporters now shunned him. Embittered, at home he imposed more strictures with which there was no arguing.

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[148] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, January 20 1946, as quoted in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 145.

[149] I deliberately refer to the word 'Winter' as in the meaning of the season, although the name Winterswijk originally derives from Germanic 'Winidaharis Wika', which means 'settlement of Winidahari'. See: Maurits Gysseling, *Toponymisch woordenboek van België, Nederland, Luxemburg, Noord-Frankrijk en West-Duitsland (voor 1226)*, Brussel 1960.

[150] Minutes of the school board meeting 1886, as quoted in: Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 24-25.

When Mondrian was thirteen, however, his father had an unexpected boost. Pieter Mondriaan was publicly commended at a school board meeting held following the celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the school he had been running since moving to Winterswijk five years earlier. The minutes of that meeting on October 30, 1885, report the declaration of 'the headmaster's extraordinary industry' for having decorated the school 'most tastefully and appropriately' and having transformed it into a 'Christian national festive hall' which 'provided fresh proof of the fine taste and Christian national artistic spirit of the skilled designer and executor.'[151] In his otherwise gloomy existence, spiraling downwards, Pieter Mondriaan had managed to escape his usual state of misery by making pictures. For the pleasure he provided through art, he was praised rather than attacked. His teenage son took it all in.

VIII

Pieter Mondriaan insisted that his family adhere to a code of behavior in everyday life that was increasingly exceptional in its strictness. His wife and children obeyed him explicitly, but it wasn't easy for them, especially since the more liberal practioners of the Dutch Reformed sect were in the majority in town.[152]

In the summer of 1930, Piet would write Carel a letter that captures how their father's harsh sectarianism played out in the lives of his children. Carel had recently married. He and his wife had organized their household so that Johanna—his and Piet's older sister, a spinster—could live with them. But Carel had converted to Catholicism, his wife's religion. Johanna was so upset by her brother and sister-in-law's fealty to "Papism" that she chose to stay on her own in a modest pension. Solitude and physical discomfort were preferable to the company of Catholics, and she refused their offer.

The fifty-eight-year-old Mondrian tried as best he could to placate the warring forces. With his older sister outraged and his younger brother offended, in such matters, the oldest of the brothers remained even-tempered and logical. In the letter he urged Carel to recognize "Stien"'s—this was the family's nickname for Johanna—attitude as a permanent mark of their father's tyranny. 'As regards Stien, I can understand that it is complicated for both of you. I can't see why she won't adapt herself a little, but perhaps it just isn't her atmosphere, and it may also be that the old man's teachings (!) are so entrenched that she considers Catholicism to be wrong, and that she is troubled by this. But I realize that it is difficult for you to make it clear to her that it is valued by many people, and by no means

[151] Minutes of the school board meeting of October 30 1885, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.
[152] Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 21; Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 148.

inferior to the Protestant faith. She might (have felt) feel more at home in one of those lodgings costing a guilder a day (which strikes me as incredibly cheap). It's a pity, now that you have such a nice place for her. Anyway, I can't see how she can amuse herself, given that you have a different way of life (fortunately). I realize that it is a difficult time for you to make up your mind, and in such a way that she too will be content.'[153]

Mondrian's will to impose proportion and balance on the inevitable disequilibrium of human relations prompted him to face the blunt facts truthfully but not bitterly or acrimoniously. His sister was illogical as a direct consequence of their father's absolutism. The only way to escape such oppressive values was to deal with them head-on and then move forward.

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The grip Pieter Mondriaan had had on his family had resulted in a way of life that made isolation the norm. It was as instinctive for Johanna in middle age to live on her own as it was for Piet in Paris; they have been brought up not to integrate with their community. Not only did Pieter's orthodoxy separated them from the majority of the townspeople, and his insistence on those afternoon chores keep his children from playing with others, but at the school he headed, and which they therefore attended, most everyone else was the son or daughter of farmers or workers in the textile industry, who spoke a dialect which none of the Mondriaans spoke. The official language at school was Dutch, but outside of the classroom the Mondriaans were not totally at ease with the local dialect.

Pieter Mondriaan was the only member of the family to touch alcohol, which was forbidden to his wife. He drank jenever, the chosen schnapps of the Kuyper sect. But he perceived it more as an obligatory religious ritual than a foray into pleasure. Everything in life had to have a moral significance. The purpose of existence was to serve God and the nation that worshipped Him. When Pieter Mondriaan immortalized the glories of Dutch history in lithographs like his elaborate print to illustrate events that occurred in Leiden in 1574, it was because they represented an advance of true Christianity. If he got the least bit tipsy, it was because he believed it somehow guided him toward the Holy Way. He proudly wrote as such to Kuyper, wanting to make certain it was recognized that he considered enjoyment beside the point.[154]

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Our Mondrian, however, was not just influenced by his father. During the summers, Pieter Mondriaan's youngest brother stayed with the family in Winterswijk.[155] Uncle Frits was, of course, completely engaged in the

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[153] Letter from Piet Mondrian to Carel Mondriaan, July 3, 1930, in: RKD #0613 inv. nr. 57.

[154] Letter from Pieter Mondriaan Senior to Abraham Kuyper, January 28 1874, in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 150.

[155] Henkels, *Mondriaan in Winterswijk*, p. 32.

making of art. This was long before Piet and Frits developed their differences, and the teenage Piet reveled at the sight of his uncle happily engaged in producing pictures intended for aesthetic enjoyment rather than religious instruction. Besides, it was visible to all that Frits was having a thoroughly good time of life.

Frits Mondriaan could hardly have been less like Pieter Mondriaan. Frits was the model of someone immersed in worldly pleasures. A prosperous businessman, as a painter he was successful in his goal of embellishing people's homes. Unlike Pieter Mondriaan's propaganda art to teaching the Bible and celebrating the triumphs of Dutch royalty, his canvases were of the fertile fields and gentle rivers of the Dutch countryside, the content and reasonable affluent men and women who commissioned him to paint their portraits, and the fruits and flowers in their prime he assembled gracefully for his still-lifes.

Frits, the baby of the family, had followed Willem Frederik Mondriaan, his and Pieter's father, by becoming a wig maker. After Willem had died in 1878, he had taken over the family store in The Hague. In the same years that Pieter Mondriaan was struggling to maintain the Reformed Church school in Amersfoort and inculcate neo-Calvinist values in as many as possible, Frits had been devoting himself to the fashionable shop in the cosmopolitan city. The enterprise at 39 Lange Poten in The Hague had been flourishing when Frits took over, and Frits had made the most of a good thing. In 1880, the year the Pieter Mondriaans moved to Winterswijk, he relocated the thriving establishment to a new address, at 45 Spuistraat, and in 1887 he enlarged the premises and expanded its line of luxuries. The elegant salon and shop began to advertise itself as 'F.H. Mondriaan, Hairdresser, specializing in wigs, toupes for Ladies and Gentlemen. Sale of Gentlemen's articles, perfumery, traveling and bathing items, a large and refined selection of Cravats.'[156]

We have no idea how, when they ate their evening porridge, the household in Winterswijk discussed the family's chic and prosperous business on the other side of the Netherlands. But they were closest to Frits of all their relatives. And while he lived and worked in The Hague most of the year, it was when he was with them in Winterswijk each summer that he did most of his paintings. During those lengthy stays with Pieter and his family, often using the rural setting as his subject matter, he made the art he exhibited and sold with such success in richer parts of the country.[157]

During those summer idyls, Fritz also gave art lessons to his oldest nephew. A stocky man with a handlebar mustache and pointed beard, he would sit on his folding camp stool in front of his traveling easel while

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[156] Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 154.

[157] 'There is naturally a reason for Frits Mondriaan's success with the art-collection public.' N.H. Wolf, 'Frits Mondriaan' in: *De Kunst* (1912/13)V, p. 4-6, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 154.

Mondrian, lean and lanky, stood at his side. Holding his palette with his left hand on his left knee, he dabbed paints and applied them judiciously to the canvas, while Mondrian studied his method. When Piet turned fourteen, Frits gave the boy some materials of his own so he could do further experimenting on his own.[158]

From his uncle, the enraptured young Mondrian saw painting as a ceremonial act. The model of a gentleman painter, Frits made his hobby into an event. He sported one of the wide brim hats that were a specialty of one of the fine shops neighboring his own, and almost always had a well-turned wooden pipe, hand-crafted by a distinguished Hague tobacconist, in the left-hand side of his mouth. On these outings to paint in the countryside near the Winterswijk house, he normally wore a double-breasted dark suit, starched white shirt, silk necktie, and elegant, high, lace-up boots. The flat box in which he carried his tubes of oil paints was a mess inside, but it was impeccable when closed. Being with his uncle gave young Mondrian the chance to observe the processes and materials of painting at a professional level.

The way this relationship with his uncle would eventually play out would be a defining event in Mondrian's life. If in his personal conduct he rebelled totally against his calvinist father, in his artistic modernism he violated the standards of the mentor to whom he felt a fealty he never had with the person he referred to as 'the old man.'[159] Mondrian would always maintain that, while his father taught him rudimentary drawing, it was from Frits that he refined it and learned the craft of painting that mattered infinitely more to him.[160] When in the course of time they would be in total conflict as to how that craft should be used, Mondrian would not flinch, but even if he was unwaivering in his will to reject the aesthetics of the Hague school, and to take his painting into modernist realm that to Frits was as hellish as improper or irreligious conduct was to Pieter, it would be far more emotionally taxing to reject the ways of the person who had introduced him to the art of painting and the pursuit of visible beauty than the one who has only emphasized all that was negative and forbidden.

#

Teaching young Piet basic drawing technique according to the style of the day, Frits emphasized the need to evoke the subject while maintaining a lightness of atmosphere that was as important as the articulation. Frits showed the boy which pencil to use, how sharp to have it, and how

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[158] F.M. Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, C.L.G. Veldt, Amsterdam 1907, [n.p.].

[159] 'the old man', for instance in: letter Piet Mondrian to Carel Mondriaan, July 3 1930, RKD #0613, inv.nr. 57.

[160] The first time Mondrian mentioned this was in: Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, 1907. In the last interview he gave shortly before his death Mondrian repeated it, see: Bradley, *Piet Mondrian*, 1944.

forcefully to apply it in order to achieve both goals. When they did not pack up their equipment and go off into the fields or nearby forest, uncle and nephew would work together in the playroom of the large house. Mondrian enjoyed a sense of companionship he experienced with no one else—as did Frits, whose own children were very small. The time together inside, and the short excursions into the surrounding region, were the best moments of Mondrian's everyday life. They countered the annoyance of his gardening chores. What a delight it was to observe nature in depth and make pleasing pictures, instead of wielding a hoe and being instructed on what was forbidden. And he discovered a skill in himself and an activity at which he felt completely comfortable. Not at ease in sports, never as rough and tumble as his brothers and most of his schoolmates, the teenage Mondrian felt a new safety and competence.

#

Frits Mondriaan spoke to his adolescent nephew about his work as a provider of luxuries for fashionable people as well as his joy from the act of making art. His dour father's ebullient brother opened a door to unanticipated pleasure, not just the craft of making art, and as the nephew began to emerge from his repressive childhood, it suited both to have their reputations intertwined. As long as he lived in the Netherlands, which would be until he was forty years old, Mondrian's work would be continuously compared to his uncle's. Initially, there was a marked similarity. Piet was a good student, and made his teacher proud. Once Mondrian left home at age twenty to study at the Academy in Amsterdam, and began to show for the first time in public—in group exhibitions that presented the leading artists of the day—the work of his better-known uncle was also on view. While Frits's pictures adhered to current fashions and taste, and Piet's reflected greater independence, their differences were not conspicuous, and there was a rapport between their pictures.

This would only change in about 1900. It was then that Mondrian would start to use bolder brush strokes and punchier colors. Frits would keep painting in the same pleasant but tepid style he, and most other Dutch artists of the era, had always used. The critics would quickly focus on the difference between Frits's traditionalism and his nephew's new approach. To most, Mondrian's choices were incomprehensible. The journalists thrived on the contrast, with the majority preferring Frits hands-down.[161] And,

[161] See for instance N.H. Wolf, '*Frits Mondriaan'*, De Kunst 1912/13, p. 4-6, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 154: 'But I venture to assert that nephew Piet's notions of art are still just as far removed from those of his uncle Frits as they ever were, perhaps even further!' And years later, the same critic N.H. Wolf, '*Frits Mondriaan*', De Kunst, 1925, p. 447, as translated in Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 154: 'He [Frits] also thinks his nephew Piet and his followers […] have confused buyers, an opinion shared by many non-ultra-modern painters […] and for which, in view of the facts, there are some grounds of truth.'

commercially, for the rest of Frits's lifetime, the uncle would be the winner. Mondrian would have to take commissions to survive, while Frits would make a living by selling almost everything he produced. Not only would Frits have clients while Piet did not, but the uncle's collectors were in the upper echelons of Dutch society, the aristocracy as well as to the same fashionable members of the Dutch mercantile class who frequented his wig and hairdressing salon. The Royal Family would acquire his pictures, as would museums in Russia and Germany.[162] Most of these wealthy and enthusiastic buyers would flock to the landscapes of the same Winterswijk countryside that had been the subject of paintings Piet made when his uncle was training him, and if Piet had chosen to continue in the competent Academic style they shared, the rich tobacco growers and shipbuilders and their wives who liked unchallenging objects in good taste to adorn the walls of their well-appointed homes, would have assured Piet a steady income and easy life. He would, of course, not be deterred from the violent colors and unorthodox brushwork that sundered him and his uncle. But when the future "Mondrian" was an adolescent in Winterswijk, Frits was everything to him.

IX

Innoculations were not the only matter about which Pieter Mondriaan went against government regulations. At age twelve, Piet should have gone to the state-run secondary school, a non-sectarian institution. The emphatically religious primary school provided only the first six years of one's education, and the state mandated that its students move to the national institution. We don't know how he finagled it or whether he had done the same for his daughter Johanna, somehow, Pieter Mondriaan managed to keep his son at the school he ran. He meant that Piet would be isolated from his contemporaries for the next two years, older than anyone else at the school and without his own class. Robert Welsh, the Canadian scholar for whom Albert van den Briel wrote his text on Mondrian's personality, writes in the entry for 1884 in the chronology in his catalogue raisonné that 'Mondrian chooses' to stay in his father's school and therefore miss the chance to be with people his own age and to advance educationally and socially.[163] Almost certainly it was the decision of Pieter Mondriaan whose ironclad anti-Revolutionary, neo- Calvinist beliefs and insistent separation from Kuyper and his minions had him clinging to his position of isolation. If in fact the twelve-year-old Mondrian had truly elected by his own will to remain under his father's wing rather than move to the institution where he was expected, and where he would have been surrounded by people his own age, it would

[162] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 154.
[163] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 114.

have comforted the struggling Pieter Mondriaan immensely, but more likely the father gave him no choice except to become a complete outsider at age twelve.

It was completely unusual for Mondrian to remain at the school on Zonnebrink for two years after the normal age for moving on, and still be there at age fourteen. Most of the students were younger, and he was also the oldest boy at home. And his brothers considered him fundamentally different from them rather than an esteemed, strongest older brother. Mondrian had become chronically concerned that he might damage his eyes. He avoided anything that would put his vision at risk: sports, wrestling with the others, any activity where he feared his eyes could be hurt. The fear was as compulsive as it was irrational; he had no impairment. To his brothers he became odd man out.[164]

Then, toward the end of the second year in his father's school, the fourteen-year-old declared his determination to be an artist.[165] This made him more unusual yet.

X

Pieter Mondriaan thought it was fine to paint as a hobby, but that artists should have day jobs.[166] Frits was still running the family's shop in The Hague and making good money at it; Pieter himself made drawings and lithographs, but earned his living as a teacher. Mondrian's father laid down the law: his son could not become a professional artist, but had to train to become a school teacher. Piet had no choice but to follow his father's directive, even if at that early age he already knew what he wanted above all else and insisted that, if he had to teach, his subject would be drawing.

With his father's approval, the fourteen-year-old Piet found out the requirements for the sanctioned diploma necessary to teach drawing at the primary school level nationwide. He enlisted both his father and Uncle Frits to step up the frequency and intensity of their lessons, and his parents transformed his and his siblings' playroom into a studio so that he could more easily devote himself to developing the technical proficiency requisite for him to pass the exam given by the Dutch state.[167]

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[164] 'Piet was altoos vrij bang en bij het minste gevaar bedekte hij gauw zijn oogen of deed ze dicht met afgewend gelaat. Daar dit vaak overdreven was [hielden] we er hem nog al eens mede voor de gek!' Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, January 20 1946, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 133.

[165] 'My serious drawing began when I was about 14 years old […] it appeared that I wanted to devote my life to art'. Bradley, *Piet Mondrian*, p. 17.

[166] 'He […] wanted me to get a job'. Bradley, *Piet Mondrian,* p. 17.

[167] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 29 1945, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 131.

Initially designed to be the dining room of the large house on Zonnebrink, this large space, to the right of the entrance of the hall and en route to the kitchen, made an ideal workshop for Mondrian to make anatomical drawings and develop his knowledge of how to render perspective. He obtained permission to borrow plaster casts from the Rijks Hoogere Burgerschool, the school he would have attended had he pursued his education in the normal way. On the other side of the wide street, the ornate mid-nineteenth century building was only a block away, and the fourteen-year-old lugged home colossal plasters of Moses's and Laocoon's heads from which he made charcoal drawings in his new studio.[168] He also mastered the technique for drawing different types of flowers, capturing their varying structures precisely and accurately. Piet's determination about what he wanted to do began to define him.

#

Pieter Mondriaan was a competent teacher. He devised exercises to train his son to organize complex compositions. There was no talk of imagination or emotional expression, only on technical mastery, and he was determined for the boy to acquire the necessary skills. The father set up a kitchen chair with a pail on the seat and a broom leaning against the back, and gave Piet the task of rendering it as accurately as possible. The father instructed his son he had to capture the relative scales and proportions of each object, and to situate them in his drawing with maximum fidelity to the way they were arranged in actually.[169] Pieter Mondriaan was as doctrinaire and rigid in his ideas of right and wrong draftsmanship as in everything else he did, but in his devotion to training Piet to develop the capacity to teach art, and to pass the exam, he supported his son's ambition wholeheartedly.

To his younger brothers, Piet was even more of an oddball than before. Previously, he had been simply cautious about his eyes; now he was obsessed Carel would recall that at the time their father was training him, Piet developed a 'maniacal fear of injuring his eyes. At the slightest danger he would close his eyes or cover them with his hands, turning his head away. This fear seemed absurd to other members of the family; they often joked about it.'[170] Willem, Louis, and Carel respected the compulsive recluse who perpetually retreated into his studio, but even when they saw him in the kitchen at meals, or during his breaks for coffee as he started to develop his lifelong dependence on strong doses of caffeine, he was someone apart. It was the role he would always have in the family.

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[168] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 29 1945, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 131.

[169] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 29 1945, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 131.

[170] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 46. Almost exactly the same story is told by Carel in a letter to Sal Slijper, January 20 1946, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 133. (footnote 124)

Later in life, Mondrian would make his father's opposition to his becoming an artist central to his personal story, but whatever they may have said to him, his father and mother recognized and fostered his exceptional capability and determination. Turning over to him all that space on the ground floor, dealing with the other children's reactions to their brother's special treatment, Pieter and Johanna Mondriaan gave the fourteen-year-old an exceptional sense of his singularity and his mission, as well as an ideal facility in which to progress. On the other hand, the younger children enjoyed forms of attention Piet and Johanna never had. The schism with Abraham Kuyper and his reduced ambitions left Pieter Mondriaan with more free time. He made drawings for Willem, Louis, and Carel of horses, cows, farm boys and farm girls, and knights in armor. Pieter Mondriaan was careful never to claim art as his profession, but, like his brother Frits, he had it in his blood to re-create the seeable world and bring pleasure through his pictures.

Fig. 4. Mondrian, *Woods with Stream*, 1888

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Pieter Mondriaan had good reason that his namesake had a worth nurturing. At sixteen, Piet made an extraordinary charcoal and crayon drawing. His earliest extant work, nineteen by twenty-four inches, this rendition of a rushing stream in dense woods was a tour de force (Fig. 4).[171]

[171] A1 Woods with Stream, 1888, charcoal and crayon on paper, 62 x 48 cm, Gemeentemuseum. Numbers preceded by A,B, or U before the title refer to the *Catalogue Raisonné* of Mondrian's works (Joosten and Welsh, 1998). There is

The vigorous composition testifies to the authority the boy had already developed thanks to his father's and Uncle Frits's tutelage and to all those exercises at home. Piet had the rare knack to take a flat piece of paper and evoke three-dimensional space authentically. He transformed the surface of the paper into a clear window beyond which a marvelous series of natural occurences unfolds in bright sunshine. The stream flows convincingly into the distance; a light breeze blows palpably through the thick foliage. This woodland scene reflects the aspiring artist's intense effort and astonishing flare. In spite of one area in the upper left that is articulated less clearly than the rest—the only hint that the draftsman was still a novice—it succeeds in making the subject lush and verdant, and charged it with energy and rhythm. It breathes—with that simple love of air that would be manifest in Mondrian's art, in every incarnation. With a subject traditional in Netherlandish painting at least as far back as Jacob van Ruisdael and the other masters of the seventeenth century, Mondrian, even before he was fully formed, was by nature jaunty and celebrative. Unlike the people around him, he had the same will as Van Ruisdael and Saenredam and Claesz and Rembrandt and Van Gogh and all of the greatest Dutch painters to declare life's beauty above all else and reveal it with a full heart as well as spectacular craftsmanship.

#

In teaching Mondrian drawing, his father and uncle had adhered to the method laid out by a French art educator, Alexandre Dupuis, and prevalent throughout Northern Europe at the time.[172] In 1836, Dupuis, a professor at the Collège Saint-Louis in Paris, had published his *De l'enseignement du dessins sous le point de vue industriel*.[173] This manual for art instruction challenged the traditional approach to drawing which made it "a privileged science"—difficult to understand and accessible only to "elite troupes"—and presented a program intended to teach the large public. The most radical break from the past was that the new method abandoned the usual practice of sketching from a live model. This meant that it was less costly and did not risk in Holland offending Calvinist morality: two leaps in its effectiveness on a larger scale.

The Dupuis method taught students to draw human forms in bold outlines. Like figures in a child's coloring book, they had no shading within.

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a digital successor online, hosted by the RKD Netherlands Institute for Art History (http://catalogue.pietmondrian.nl).

[172] This Dupuis method was introduced in the Netherlands by, among others, Jan Braet von Überfeldt whom Piet got to know via his uncle Frits. See Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 168. Cf. Jan Stap, *Piet Mondriaan. Zijn levensverhaal*, Erfgoedcentrum Achterhoek, Doetinchem 2011, p. 22-25.

[173] Alexandre Dupuis, *De l'Enseignement du dessins sous le point de vue industriel*, Giroux, Paris 1836.

[174] These simple contour drawings at their best captured the essential form of the subject without surface details. Like all Dupuis followers, Mondrian had drawn from those plaster busts rather than actual people to facilitate that capacity.

Mondrian adhered to Dupuis's council that artists begin 'with three-dimensional, geometric shapes'.[175] Initially, these should be angular, based on rectangles; then they can be rounded as necessary. *Woods with Stream* goes beyond simple outlines, but it is still emphatically geometrical in it decisive rendering of the tree trunks as muscular forms rising from the earth, and in its bold penetration of the space with a machine-like movement in concord with the "industrial point of view" that was Dupuis's goal.

Most Mondrian scholars denigrate this early work. Hans Janssen writes that it was 'made immediately after finishing school, when Mondrian prepared for his examination for the State Normal School for drawing instructors. He passes the examination in October 1889. This drawing might be made in preparation for that examination. Maybe he made the picture as a copy to an original. Leaves, rocks, soil and water are barely characterized. […] the beginning of a long period in which he wanted to learn the art of drawing himself, with energy and enthusiasm as the driving force behind it, instead of outstanding talent.'[176] Herbert Henkels—the distinguished curator who was in charge of the archives at the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, where the rarely-shown drawing is usually in storage rather than on view—says that it 'has the air' of a copy and was merely an essay in the tradition of an earlier generation of Dutch landscape painters.[177] He considers 'the minute detail and "true-to-life" rendering of the pattern of light through the trees'[178] as a reflection of an old-fashioned approach with no particular merit. Robert Welsh, in his entry about the drawing in the catalogue raisonné, focuses on whether or not the drawing was based on 'a reproduction of the work of another artist'; like Henkels, he feels it is probably a copy, although neither was able, after considerable research, to

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[174] Camilla Murgia, 'The Rouillet Process and Drawing Education in Mid-Nineteenth-Century France', in: *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide*, 2(2003)1 [n.p.].
[175] Murgia, *Rouillet Process*, [n.p.]
[176] 'direct na de lagere school ontstaan, toen Mondriaan zich ging voorbereiden op het examen voor de lagere acte handtekenen. Hij haalde dit examen in oktober 1889. De tekening kan zijn ontstaan als voorbereiding op dat examen. Misschien maakte hij de voorstelling naar een voorbeeld. Bladeren, rotsen, grond en water zijn nauwelijks gekarakteriseerd. […] aan het begin van een langer periode waarin hij zich de tekenkunst eigen wilde maken, met als drijfveer eerder een grote dosis energie en enthousiasme dan een uitgesproken talent.' Hans Janssen, *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum*, Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 2008, p. 16.
[177] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 33.
[178] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 33.

identify the work that served as a model.[179] Welsh concludes that it was based on a printed reproduction, because, in exploring every bit of woods near Winterswijk, he was unable to locate this particular bend in a stream.[180]

Welsh writes that the drawing 'reflects earlier nineteenth-century Romantic […] modes' and lacks originality, even though he credits it as having 'considerable technical facility in its linear and tonal patterns.'[181] I agree with neither Henkels nor Welsh in their dismissal of a work that, even when merely reproduced on a printed page, is masterful. And when I studied the drawing in the flesh in the storage basement of the Gemeente Museum, I became convinced that Mondrian, however repressive his background, however arduous his future artistic development would be, had, from the start, the flare, and the consuming enthusiasm for linear rhythm and the force of light, which infuses all of his best work, from every period, whatever the "style."

Both Welsh and Henkels sell a minor masterpiece short. Regardless of its artistic sources, *Woods with Stream* displays a level of achievement and a sheer engagement with life that are extraordinary for an artist of any age, let alone a sixteen-year-old. In spite of its minor flaws and lack of sophistication, it has elements of what will make Mondrian exceptional in every phase of his art, not just in the late work for which he is best known.

Unlike a mere act of slavish copying, either of another art work, or of a natural scene, *Woods with stream* soars with passion for both the natural world and the process of making art, harnessed by steadfast discipline and sense of craft. There is a rich chiaroscuro, and remarkable precision in the placement of each tree trunk in the receding space. The combustion is all the more powerful because of the underlying control.

#

Later in his life, when Mondrian was at the height of his fame, there would be at least three occasions in Paris when he was at friends' for lunch—the Arps, the Gleizes, and the Kandinskys—and insisted on being seated with his back to a window lest he have even the smallest part of a tree in his line of vision.[182] Those events, and his adamant refusal to look at so much as a

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[179] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 146.

[180] In a recent book on Mondrian and nature, a Dutch art historian working for Staatsbosbeheer (State Forestry) claims that 'This landscape, with its rocky soil and a for Dutch concepts fast-flowing stream, cannot be located in the Achterhoek. Possibly just across the German border, but there is no proof that he has been there.' See: Marcel van Ool, *Mondriaan. Uit de natuur*, Athenaeum – Polak & Van Gennep, Amsterdam 2017, p. 37.

[181] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 146.

[182] 'I remember that one day, at Albert Gleizes', on the Boulevard Lannes, he asked if he could change places at the table in order not to see the trees of the Bois de Boulogne. Later, after 1934, the same scene was enacted at Kandinsky's in Neuilly, and again at Arp's, in Meudon.' Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 74. Cf. Nina Kandinsky, *Kandinsky und Ich*, Knaur, München 1987, p. 178:

single leaf, became central to his myth. It was always said that he had a profound aversion to nature.

Anne de Staël, daughter of the painter Nicolas de Staël, and a gifted poet and writer, said that this is a completely fallacious interpretation. Anne told that she had always understood that Mondrian could not look out the window at trees because the sight of them moved him to such an extent that he could think of nothing else.[183]

As her father's daughter, she well understood that sort of obsession. And she is right. It was love, not aversion, that overcame Mondrian if he even glimpsed tree branches in the sunlight. When you look at *Woods with Stream*—and a lot else that Mondrian would produce in the ensuing two decades—you get convinced that his famous social quirk of needing to be reseated at luncheons developed because at one point he was so intoxicated by trees that he was, forever after, like an alcoholic; even a glimpse would make him an addict again.

#

An intrepid Japanese art historian—intrepid because she had organized Josef Albers show in a remote industrial city some three hours from Osaka, a place where few people knew Albers's name previously—told me that Mondrian belonged to the Japanese tradition whereby people see themselves as part of nature, at one with it, and not as its observers. My colleague, unusual not just for her independence but for her ability to plunge into the real depths of the artists she admired, recognized qualities that aligned Josef and Mondrian, above all their reverence for universal natural phenomena, and their vision of themselves as integral, tiny parts of the greater cosmos. She led me to a series of essays on Mondrian's "art and metaphysics" published by the critic Kazuo Akane in 1964, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of Mondrian's death. While they have never been translated, a summary of Akane's ideas exists in English—albeit quirky English that, when quoting rather than summarizing it, I have left uncorrected.[184]

'Unvergessen ist mir indes Piet Mondrians Besuch in unserer Wohnung geblieben. Es war an einem strahlenen Frühjahrstag. Die Kastanienbäume vor unserem Haus standen in voller Blüte, und Kandinsky hatte den Kaffeetisch so hingestellt, daβ Mondrian von seinem Platz aus diese herrliche Blütenpracht sehen konnte. Während wir uns beim Nachmittagstee unterhielten, unterbrach Mondrian plötzlich das Gespräch und sagte: "Ach, wie entsetzlich!" "Was ist entsetzlich?" fragte Kandinsky. "Diese Bäume." "Diese Bäume?" "Ja" "Ich wollte Ihnen eine Freude machen. Aber wir können gern unsere Plätze wechseln." Kandinsky lieβ sich auf Mondrians Stuhl nieder und Mondrian setzte sich mit dem Rücken zum Fenster hin.'

[183] Conversation with Anne de Staël, November 2014.

[184] Kazuo Akane, *Piet Mondrian. Life and Art*, Bijutsu Shuppan-sha, Tokyo 1971

This obscure text on the interrelation between Mondrian's art and Japanese art is unparalleled for the insight with which it discusses the Mondrian who first revealed his true self when he drew *Woods with Stream* in Winterswijk at age sixteen, and who remained essentially the same for the rest of his life.

We consider Akane at this moment in Mondrian's life, when he was sixteen years old, even though Akane was writing about the artist in light of his entire life's work, because by the time Mondrian was a teenager he had already become one of those exceptional individuals who formed himself independent of the world in which he grew up. Mondrian was then, as he would always be, more at home under the universal sky—in the cosmos he evokes in those woods in his first significant drawing—than under the roof of his family house. He had already become one with certain metaphysical forces.

Akane begins by gracefully and trenchantly explaining "the qualitative difference between the Western art and the Eastern" and in so doing brings us to the spiritual core of Mondrian as he was from this early forest scene through the *Boogie Woogies*. 'In sharp contrast to the purely rational, three-dimentional, and objective method of Western Realism which was originated in Greek art and established through the scientific research after the Renaissance, the Orientalism took a different course: Chinese art (which was the origin of Japanese art) intended to abstract the "meaning" or the spirit of an external object rather than copying the outer reality of the object. What is expressed in such a unique world of vision is not a natural physical "space" but the density of concentrated "time" in which a painter and an object, and the spirit and emotion are united in perfect harmony […] Being entirely different from Western abstractionism which was attained as a result of the analyzing and synthesizing of external objects, Japanese art is of abstract quality in its origin and simultaneously symbolic.'[185]

Akane homes in on Mondrian's fundamental approach to life and the attitude toward himself. What the Japanese art critic gleens, with the perspective of the Oriental culture in which he was raised, in a way that has escaped the European and American pundits who have written on the artist, are the qualities that make Mondrian entirely different from most people raised in the Western tradition.'It is an attitude of Western Realism to recognize an object as a being opposed to oneself and to "conquer" it by describing it in detail. In the case of Japanese painters, however, they try to see an object from its core, getting themselves into it; in other words, they try to assimilate with the things outside, even metamorphosising themselves into a tree or a flower when they paint it. Such an attitude symbolizes a harmonious unity of the subject and the object, and the individual and the

[185] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. iii.

universal.'[186] Is it too sensational to say that there was a European painter who was closely approaching to the very core of the tradition of Japanese art in the most spiritual way without being perceived by anybody and probably even without being aware of himself ? Is it too sudden at this moment to mention the name of Piet Mondrian?[187]

Akane is careful not to invent facts, but, rather, to focus on issues that go beyond place or time or matters of outside influence. 'There was, of course, not telling about Mondrian's interest in anything Japanese. What were found among the articles left after his death in New York were […] books […] about Theosophy, instead of a copy of a Japanese print or calligraphy.'[188]

Still, Akane is convinced of 'The point of "symbolic spirituality" visualized in the pure aesthetics of his works is in coincidence with Japanese art which was characterized by the true nature of abstract and at the same time symbolic quality. His later work composed of horizontal and vertical lines have a similar appearance to Japanese architecture. On the other hand, his works are frequently said to look like tulip-fields in Holland and his "Broadway Boogy-Woogy" looks exactly like the lights of Broadway in New York. However, Mondrian's works are quite as "Japanese" as they are "Dutch" and "American" on the more fundamental essential point rather than their mere appearance.'[189]

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'Despite the fact that he left a famous series showing a process of abstractization of a tree, his fundamental method was not such abstractization but abstraction to compose the reality. Mondrian as an abstract-realist saw what Nature expresses as "repose," and sought for the true vision of reality as Japanese painters always did. For him the reality lies in the depth of Nature and he tried to extract it in order to express. The reality in Japanese art which is expressed as *meaning* is truly in accordance with Mondrian's reality. The reality thus expressed for him becomes universal through "equilibrium.'[190]

Akane amplifies on how this had to do with an essentially humble and self-effacing view in light of the forces of the universe: 'Mondrian is considered to be the first artist who recognized the possibility of balance in asymmetry, breaking off the thousand-year tradition. As Georg Schmidt

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[186] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. iii.
[187] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. iv.
[188] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. iv.
[189] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. iv.
[190] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. v. This corresponds to what Carel Blotkamp claims in his 1994 book *Mondriaan. Destructie als kunst*: 'he [Mondrian] came to the realization that abstraction, which implies the destruction of the incidental, outward image of reality, could be used to portray a purer image of that reality […]' Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian. The Art of Destruction*, Reaktion Books, London 2001, p. 15.

explained in this connection, "Symmetry means domination of the center to the sides and symmetrical harmony is possible only in Sub-ordination and Super-ordination," just as the Western view of Nature is based on domination of Nature by human being. The Japanese who grasped the reality of Nature as the *meaning* sought for a real focus not on the center of geometric balance but in liquid, dynamic interrelation of movement such as *push, draw, cross* in free co-ordination of every part of space, as their relation with Nature suggests. A focus lies neither on a geometric center nor on a mere spatial concentration, but it thus becomes a *space* itself.'[191]

Akane ends in recognition of Mondrian's traits that were already evident when he was sixteen, and that took him spiritually out of Winterswijk and into the orbit in which he would function for the rest of his life, wherever he was. 'What I mean to emphasize is the greatness of Mondrian's pure aesthetics that suggested a new vision in the future from the universal point of view.'[192]

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Having developed the power to have visual representation to evoke infinite beauty, Mondrian was enthralled. No wonder he was determined to consecrate his life to painting and drawing. He recognized the potential of art to celebrate and at the same time augment the wonder of existence, and he instinctively possessed the skills and sense of craft to express his vision as he wanted. He also had the good fortune to have a father and uncle who nurtured his innate talents and a mother to back up the team.

Beyond that, art was his way out. Living in a world where there were interdictions against so many pleasures, he had found his escape route. In the rest of his everyday life, more was forbidden than encouraged; the acts of drawing and painting, however, freed him. Even his dour father had known a rare bit of pleasure making those pictures on the blackboard at Christmas time and for the school's anniversary celebration. While almost every other element of daily life in Winterswijk required restraint, art was like the dynamite that exploded out of the tops of milk buckets on New Year's.

The sixteen-year-old had an understanding of the steely rules of drawing according to Dupuis's methods as well as a natural gift that enabled him to convey sunlight penetrating the foliage and dappling the leaves and bark, and to create movement through space, and to invoke the weightless. By instinct, he was forging a connection with anyone who might view his art. In *Woods with Stream*, he invited others to feel the space between the foreground and background, to imagine wading up the stream and over its little waterfalls, even to hear the permanent whoosh of water cascading over the rocks. Mondrian presented these wonders in a spirit of unabashed gratefulness that penetrates his viewers as well.

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[191] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. v.
[192] Akane, *Mondrian*, p. vi.

XI

Mondrian continued his training under his parents' roof until the end of 1889. If he socialized or had any sort of private life outside the family home during those three and a half years after he left his father's school at age fourteen, we know nothing of it. Then, four months shy of his eighteenth birthday, he went to Amsterdam to take the exams he had to pass to become a primary school teacher.

They were administered in the metropolis over a three-day period, from December 9 to 11. The facts are scant, but it is likely Mondrian had never been in the metropolis before, and that his father had to arrange his trip and accommodations.

A committee of twelve teachers judged the exam results. The main task on which the students were evaluated was 'the proper designing of a shaded drawing of a simple object and of a not too complicated relief-ornament, to be copied from nature.'[193] Other qualifications included a clear understanding of perspective and 'knowledge of the demands of group instruction in drawing in general and of a good method in particular.'[194] The dozen academicians determining success or failure were looking both for technical capability and the personal traits required of an effective teacher. They interviewed the candidates to gauge their communication skills and other characteristics vital for successful human interaction.

Out of the one hundred and twenty young men who took the test that year, Mondrian was among the fifty who passed. Fewer women tried, but a greater percentage succeeded, with twenty-three out of forty-two making the grade.[195]

For the rest of his life, Mondrian proudly held on to the certificate conferring on him the right to teach. The document was signed by W.B.G. Molkenboer, Director of the State Normal School for Drawing Instructors. Once he was well-known, Mondrian would show off the diploma to almost every journalist or friend or art collector who called on him.[196] His visitors were astonished. This was another of Mondrian's quirks—like the white plaster flower—that took people by surprise. No one expected a ground-breaking abstractionist who had gone against almost every societal norm, and subscribed to none of the usual expectations of everyday conduct, to appear so proud of something so traditional and comparatively insignificant.

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[193] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.
[194] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.
[195] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.
[196] Journalists like Augustine de Meester-Obreen and Henry van Loon mention his certificates in their articles. A.O. [Augustine de Meester Obreen], 'Piet Mondriaan', in: *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift*, 25(1915)50;II, p. 396-399. Henry van Loon, 'Parijsche brief. Piet Mondriaan', in: *Hollandsch Weekblad*, (1937)35, p. 17-20.

It was incongruous for the jazz-loving pioneer of abstraction to present this document from his past, covered with signatures and stamps and seals. Having pared down his life to a minimum of possessions, and eschewed all the strictures of academia, why did he flaunt this evidence of official approval? Was it as a joke? Even if he did, occasionally, teach in his father's stead, the only actual use he made of the degree was as a stepping stone to the next degree, which in turn assured him entry into the Rijksakademie, and none of that seemed to matter any more.

For a biographer, this falls into the category of information we know about Mondrian where we can be certain of the facts but not of the reasons. The diploma represented his acquisition of technical skill, and his ability, at a young age, to play according to the rules, and maybe it was important to the avant-garde Mondrian that others know that he had succeeded in garnering the approval of the academicians, but rarely has someone been so uninterested in his past, so focused on the present, so absent nostalgia and anti-authority. Mondrian did not care especially about children, or about teaching, so why was he so gleeful about this accreditation of his ability to instruct young people to draw in a style that did not interest him in the least?

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The receipt of his diploma meant that "Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan"—his name still undifferentiated from his father's—could teach drawing at any primary school in the Netherlands.

He decided, however, to remain at home.

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As with the diploma, you may want to hypothesize as to why Mondrian made his choices in life. Here, too, I cannot say. But by most standards, his way of doing things was mightly odd. For his last two years of regular schooling, he had been the only person in his age bracket, and older than anyone else. Then he stayed at home. By all appearances, he was not like other teenagers, and rarely ventured anywhere—except to paint with his uncle.

With the degree for which he had trained intensely over a period of three years, the seventeen-year-old could now have found a job anywhere in the country. He would have had the freedom of which most young men dream, and could readily have put himself somewhere more amusing than Winterswijk. Maybe he was simply frugal and sensible. He knew that, by remaining where he was, he could live at little cost while pursuing a higher-level diploma which would enable him to teach on a secondary school level. But he was an age when most young people want only to spread their wings. And later in life, he would make the family home seem like a place anyone would want to flee, whatever the practical advantages. We will never know for sure why he did not leave the nest. But whether he was avoiding something he feared if he moved out, or needed some form of security he was terrified to lose even if his situation was not particularly appealing, he was distinctly unusual.

The only occasions when Mondrian saw people other than family members were when he would teach drawing to the older students at his father's school on the other side of the courtyard.[197] Otherwise, with that primary school teaching degree under his belt, Mondrian focused all of his attention on working toward the secondary school certification with its more stringent requirements.

At nearly age eighteen, he decided he needed instruction more professional than his uncle's or his father's. In Doetinchem, a town thirty kilometers away from Winterswijk, there was a successful full-time artist, Jan Braet von Überfeldt. Uncle Frits told Piet that Jan Braet, together with his college friend and fellow painter Valentijn Bing had in the 1860's educated lots of drawing teachers and knew exactly what Piet should pay attention to in order to earn his certificate. Braet and Bing developed a new way of teaching drawing and had made a textbook for that purpose[198] Frits Mondriaan knew Braet and Bing from the painters Societies in Amsterdam and The Hague. The story goes that, because Braet lived so nearby Winterswijk, Frits proposed his nephew Piet to introduce him to the old painter. Likely it was as follows: Frits Mondriaan writes to Braet that he and his nephew want to visit him. A positive reply follows. At the confirmed day somewhere in 1888, Piet and his uncle are well-timed at the Winterswijk station, waiting for a steam train that will bring them to Doetinchem. After three quarters of an hour they railed some 30 kilometers through the varied landscape of the Achterhoek, they arrive at the station of Doetinchem. With his latest drawings under his arm Piet walks together with his uncle towards Braet's house at the Grutstraat.[199] The eighty-two years old Jan Braet von Überfeldt looked at the teenager's portofolio and agreed to take him on as a student.

Mondrian began to make regular excursions to Doetinchem for their lessons. Braet was unlike anyone else he knew. The octogenarian had had a severe bout of polio as a child, and walked with a pronounced limp, but was spirited and energetic, with no sign of defeat from being physically crippled. He dressed flamboyantly, always with a foulard or cape, and invariably attracted attention whenever he ventured out. He was married to his cousin, Maria Augusta von Überfeldt, twenty-one years younger. They were childless, but treated their large pet goat as a member of the family.[200]

Braet, now retired from painting, had made a fortune with Romantic-realist portraits and genre scenes, lithographic illustrations for a book on

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[197] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 115. Cf. Seuphor*, Mondrian*, p. 46: 'Before obtaining his second diploma, he [Mondrian] had taught drawing at a school in Winterswijk.'

[198] Jan Braet von Überfeldt, Valentijn Bing, *Handeling tot het teekenen naar de natuur en de beginselen der doorzigtkunde*, Brinkman, Amsterdam 1863-1866.

[199] Jan Stap, *Piet Mondriaan. Zijn levensverhaal*, Erfgoedcentrum Achterhoek, Doetinchem 2011, p. 22-25.

[200] Stap, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 25.

Dutch regional costumes, and with royalties from a two-volume text he had co-authored to present his method for teaching drawing in primary schools.[201] The art with which he had enjoyed such success was exceptionally well-executed, remarkable for its shimmering surfaces; he rendered the expensive silk and damasks of his bourgeois portrait subjects with exceptional finesse. An accomplished draftsman, he had developed an agreeable style in the manner of Ingres, if absent the genius.

Braet was a fount of information about the making of art. He had a substantial collection of Dutch nineteenth-century painting as well as stacks of reproductions of art by the Old Masters. Everything in his collection exemplified his belief that artists must work directly from nature, applying the rules of perspective which were essential for them to master.

Braet took Mondrian under his wing. This meant more than simply improving Mondrian's draftsmanship by helping him develop a capacity to shade absent in the technique Mondrian had learned at home. Braet's greater gift to his protégé was to encourage him to believe in his own intrinsic talent and chosen course in life. The tall lean teenager with his shock of smooth black hair was someone waiting to be brought out of his shell. Quiet and pensive, he was used to functioning in isolation even with his siblings and parents in the same house. Braet helped him become increasingly able to execute both what he saw and what he imagined, and to develop the confidence to paint as he wanted. Learning which brush to use and with what weight to apply the paint, Mondrian became emboldened to orchestrate the overall composition artfully while capturing the reality of appearances.

Michel Seuphor tells us that at home, meanwhile, Mondrian was having 'painful skirmishes with his father.'[202] Once Seuphor's book came out—a decade after the artist's death—that father-son conflict became essential to Mondrian's story as it has been told ever since. It is possible that Mondrian described a wrenching disagreement with his father. Or else Seuphor over-colored their differences to give his subject the myth of the romantic artist who fought Cézanne's same battle to break the shackles of paternal authority in favor of art.[203] But it is significant that Carel Mondrian's accounts never have father and son pitted against one another. What we

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[201] Valentijn Bing*;* Jan Braet von Überfeldt, *Nederlandsche kleederdragten naar de natuur getekend door Valentyn Bing en Braet von Ueberfeldt*, Buffa en Zn, Amsterdam 1857.

[202] Seuphor*, Mondrian,* p. 46.

[203] Cf. Alex Danchev, *Cézanne. A life*, Pantheon Books, New York 2012, p. 54: 'He wanted the best for his son as he saw it. […] there was the question of how young Paul [Cézanne] should continue his education after the Collège Bourbon, and what profession he should follow. For Louis-Auguste [Cézanne's father] the answer was a foregone conclusion: the boy must study something, and what he must study is Law. Law would be eminently suitable. Anything else would not.'

learn from the only first-hand witness is simply that his 'father would have liked to see him become a teacher. Something he [Mondrian] did not like at all.'[204] Piet also brought home folders which Von Überfeldt had filled with illustrations of art works.[205] The art-hungry teenager was thrilled to study and copy them and mount them on his studio walls, and the rest of the family saw them whenever they passed in and out of the kitchen.

In any case it would have been rare for a seventeen-year-old boy still living at home not to have at least some differences with his father. And they cannot have been too dire; the atmosphere was sufficiently agreeable for Mondrian to stay in his parents' house and make some impressive small oil paintings. In what was essentially a Dutch seventeenth-century style, they were good enough to be sent to important public exhibitions at the other end of the Netherlands. In May of 1890, a painting of apples, and a drawing of the threshing floor of a barn, both by "Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan," were included in a triennial exhibition in The Hague of work by artists living all over the country.[206] Two years later, when the drawing was again shown publicly, in Utrecht, an anonymous critic, in the daily paper there wrote as 'e', 'How well he can draw and feels and knows how to represent the effects of light and color.'[207] The enthusiastic observer declared that the charcoal sketch of a barn interior was made with 'a detailed and broadly handled drawing technique which fully satisfies.'[208] Living in relative isolation, Mondrian, and his father as well, were buoyed by the endorsement from afar.

Like most people, Mondrian needed his admirers and champions. They would always be small in number, but the people who believed in him shared their belief in his exceptional talent and imagination. Now that the first enthusiastics for his highly individual approach had appeared in his life, Mondrian's will to continue became even stronger.

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[204] '[…] en vader had hem maar leraar willen zien worden. Iets waar hij niets van moest hebben.' Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 29 1945. RKD #0150 inv.nr. 132.

[205] 'Hij [Braet] had de gewoonte uit alle illustraties de mooiste platen uit te knippen om in groote omslagen te bewaren. Piet kwam meest met eenige van die portefeuilles terug […]' Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, January 20 1946. RKD #0150 inv.nr. 133.

[206] Welsh, *CR I,* p. 115. Both art works are not identified and are therefore included in the CR as UA1 and UA2.

[207] "e." 'Kunstliefde: Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen III,' in: *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, April 27 1892, as quoted in: Welsh 1998, p. 472.

[208] "e." 'Kunstliefde: Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen III,' in: *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, April 27 1892, as quoted in: Welsh 1998, p. 472.

XII

Except for the regular outings to Doetinchem to work with Braet von Überfeldt for the following two years, Mondrian rarely left his family's house in Winterswijk. Until he was twenty, he basically stayed in the well-fitted studio that was his personal boot camp. He became even taller and leaner, growing into a surly handsomeness. His features matured, and he developed a warrior's nose and full lips.

If there were women or men in Winterswijk who fancied his Heathcliff-like appearance and demeanor and the singular intensity with which he developed his artistic skills, there is no sign that he responded to them. Mondrian was perfectly amiable, but he preferred solitude to companionship. He had no hobbies or pastimes, and his only outings were to draw in the woods and to visit the stylish and worldly artist over sixty years his elder who was guiding him.

Mainly, Mondrian prepared for the state-administered exams that ostensibly would allow him to teach at a more advanced level. But the main significance of the additional degree was that it would automatically guarantee his admission to the Rijksakademie—the national school of art in Amsterdam.[209] His main motive for succeeding at the demanding battery of tests was the thrilling possibility of attending that world-class art school in the Netherlands' most vibrant city.

Pieter Mondriaan must have realized that his son was not planning to accede to his demand that he teach—which, after all, he could have done with the first degree. Mondrian's father also knew that his son would require financial support if he went to the Rijksakademie. There may have been the disagreements Michel Seuphor reported, but the arrangement whereby Mondrian continued to study, draw, and paint at home, remained intact.

The second series of tests, which would allow him to teach at secondary school, required competence in drawing the human skeleton and musculature as well as 'drawing in perspective and with light and shade; […] knowledge of the theory of ornament and of decorative art, and […] history of art; ability in the stylizing of flowers and leaves; […] ability in drawing flat ornaments on a large scale in accordance with a given model, […] ability in drawing on the blackboard and by heart.'[210] Like the previous exams, they also tested the capacity to communicate with a broad spectrum of students: 'knowledge of the demands of an appropriate way of teaching of hand drawing for the different types of schools, where the said instruction is given.'[211]

This rigorous, old-fashioned training was the norm for many future modernists of Mondrian's generation. The artistic pioneers of the twentieth

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[209] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 169; Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.
[210] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.
[211] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 144.

century who would advance painting and architecture into unimagined new territory governed by pure abstraction and an abandonment of naturalism all had to master the rendering of decorative ornament based on botanical motifs and learn how to make faithful copies of traditional subjects. They had no chance to move ahead until their technical know-how was evaluated according to demanding, old-fashioned standards. As young trainees, Anni Albers in Germany, Le Corbusier in Switzerland, Pablo Picasso in Spain, Henri Matisse in France, and most of their contemporaries followed the rules imposed by the educational establishments in their native countries.[212] They accepted, without argument, the discipline and mechanical development deemed sacred in the late nineteenth century. Like the others, Mondrian did not mind or question the stifling, hidebound approach.

He was not, however, certain that he was on the right track. According to Seuphor, when Mondrian was nineteen, just as he was reaching the point where he might earn the next degree and finally move off into a world far from the parental home, he considered a very different course. He considered becoming a minister in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands.[213]

Religion had always fascinated him. Mondrian imagined himself serving God and realizing the mission which had been preached to him morning, noon, and night from his earliest childhood. If he became a clergyman, he might succeed where his father had failed, and complete his father's unfulfilled mission of enforcing Neo-Calvinist doctrine and spreading the faith in an omnipotent God. And he would have no need ever to move far from home.

But soon enough, the idea lost its grip. Mondrian again forged ahead with oil painting, never to look back. The only other times in his life he would consider any profession other than being a painter would occur in the early 1920s when he was living in Paris and told people that if his art didn't begin to sell he would move to the south and do agricultural work. The man who so despised garden work as a child insisted on one occasion that he was heading to Province to take a job picking olives, and on another that he would become a general farm laborer for a friend with many acres

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[212] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 351; Nicholas Fox Weber, *Le Corbusier A Life*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2008, p. 32-33; John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso Volume I: 1881-1906*, Jonathan Cape, London 1991, p. 62-67; Jack Flam, *Matisse: the man and his art 1869-1918*, Thames & Hudson, London 1986, p. 29-33. Although Matisse followed the rules imposed by the educational establishments, it was not totally without questioning the hidebound approach.

[213] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 52. While Seuphor's generalizations about Mondrian's personal relationships are of dubious merit, and some of his chronology is incorrect, in the case of this notion that Mondrian considered life in the clergy, which Seuphor could only have heard firsthand from the artist himself, he seems a reliable source.

served to grow a range of fruits and vegetables.[214] On these rare occasions when he considered abandoning painting, he said it in earnest, and might even have briefly believed it. But once he decided against the career in the church that had momentarily tempted him when the prospect loomed of his moving far away, he again pursued the dream on which he had settled at age fourteen.

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Fig. 5. Mondrian, *Dead Hare*, 1891

His flirtation with the pulpit behind him, approaching the age of twenty, Mondrian painted an impressive still-life of a dead hare (Fig. 5).[215] The animal hanging from its right hind leg is a feat of verisimilitude. Its setting—the space above a wooden plank that recedes into a black background—is, meanwhile, a triumph of austere elegance. The contrast between the luminous subject and the rich black behind it recalls paintings by Zurbarán. While the canvas belongs to the tradition of Dutch still-lifes as well as to

[214] 'Maar je begrijpt als ik eenmaal de overtuiging krijg dat het nooit financieel houdbaar wordt door N.P. werk, dat ik er dan uit schei. Dan maar olijven plukken in het Zuiden. Ik kan daar 12 fr. per dag verdienen en daar leven de lui van.', letter Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, February 7 1922, RKD #0613, inv.nr. 26; ''t Zal me toch wel niet mogelijk zijn om door te zetten. Ik zie nu met die kou hoeveel geld er noodig is. En geen enkele artist verkoopt meer. Alle goede artisten gaan terug: water in de wijn doen. Ik schei er liever uit. De gelegenheid in tuinbouw een bestaan te vinden biedt mijn vriend van Eck me, op zijn boerderij in 't Zuiden. Ik denk in Januari daar heen te gaan.', letter Piet Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, December 6 1921, RKD #0613, inv.nr. 63.

[215] A7 Geschoten Haas (Dead Hare), 1891, Oil on canvas, 80 x 51 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

Chardin's pictures of freshly killed game, it is not a mere pastiche; it has a zing that goes far beyond the slavishness of a copy. The sharp focus with which Mondrian renders the hair, and the sheer elegance of the matt black background, have assuredness without arrogance. With his renewed determination to be a painter, Mondrian had become his own man and developed his capacity to paint with a punch that heartens and energizes the viewer.[216]

Mondrian's flare and confidence are equally present in several paintings of fruit baskets and earthenware pitchers that he made that year. Adhering to the same historic traditions as in the painting of hanging game, Mondrian focused on the art of the past that was the most tough and truthful. He imbued his own painting with those same qualities, as he always would. The young painter concentrates his subject, reduces the elements, and eliminates anything superfluous. He makes the straw of a basket the perfect blend of supple and taut, and the skin of an onion microscopically thin. He renders a stone slab so that it is heavy and firm. He would not even dream of dipping his hat toward the lyricism and prettiness that were the vogue of the era.

Unsurprisingly, when these canvases were exhibited the following year, the anonymous critic in the Utrecht daily paper disapproved of Mondrian's straightforwardness. The "expert" opined, 'He can […] do more than he gives us here. […] There is something lacking which we cannot do without: poetry, mood.'[217] Mondrian was pitted against that prevailing taste. Even though he was training to pass exams that upheld the current standards for artistic know-how, he refused to use the devices of Romantic painting that would have been required to garner the critic's approval. The overt sentimentality and gratuitous atmospheric effects demanded by the preferred style of the era were anathema to Mondrian.

More importantly, it was not what he rejected that mattered; his discovery of a vision he could trust, and that gladdened him immeasurably, gave him a sheer delight new in his lonely life.

Mondrian had to be tough to remain so independent and out of sync with the current taste. To be accused of not having poetry, and of not having given enough of himself, were stinging insults. Yet he had the force within him to be undaunted by the slams. In fact he would wait many years until his chosen course found an audience who recognized just how poetic he was. But even if the goal he was seeking was elusive, he had his own

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[216] Hans Janssen feels differently. He writes in his 2016 biography: '[…] the image is done with a hardly practiced painters hand. The carefulness was more due to a reluctant caution than knowledge and accuracy. […] The texture of the fur hardly shows any variation and looseness.' Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 229.

[217] "e." 'Kunstliefde: Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen III,' in: *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, April 27 1892, as quoted in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 150.

father's stubbornness and tenacity, and would not dream of wavering in his quest for what would ultimately become a form of spiritual beauty.

XIII

In November of 1891, Mondrian made a painting of a puppy that is as bold as the still-lifes even if the subject by its very nature assumes a quality of "cuteness," even adorability.[218] Robert Welsh's sole commentary on this small oil on canvas is that it 'incorporates a somewhat artificial pose of the dog (based on a photograph?), with a surrounding ambiance which is conceived more as a decorative foil than as observation of a natural setting.'[219] While Welsh's Mondrian *Catalogue Raisonné* is indispensable for Mondrian research, that evaluation sells short a forceful, original painting.

In its tender rendering of a fetching subject, this small canvas exudes the sheer warmth that was vital, lifelong, to Mondrian's work. The simple happiness it provides is all the more remarkable given the insistent denial of pleasure in his childhood. The young dog's portrait is enlivened by qualities that Mondrian developed in a radically different form in his abstractions thirty years later, but that are already imparting well-being to the viewer. The crisp black of most of the dog's hair, which shines brilliantly in the sunlight coming from the upper right, plays against the bright white of his muzzle, chest, and paws. It is the same counterpoint that will occur in Mondrian's spectacular gridded diamond compositions and other geometric constructions; what was probably a commissioned portrait of someone's pet proves that from the start Mondrian was viscerally charged by the interplay of neatly confined precincts of black and white.

Puppy, simply and eloquently, is a reminder that the sight of things—whether young dogs or abstract patterns—can penetrate our souls. Looking begets enchantment. Analysis is a secondary issue. We don't know precisely why the contrast of black and white or the appearance of puppies elevates the human spirit, but they do so.

It is less important, but true, that the nineteen-year-old artist did not articulate the setting for this portrait of a young dog as successfully as he evoked the animal itself. The sun-dappled rocks and the stream bed fall apart plastically, failing to assume true mass or spatial depth. He simply worked the backwork in a slapdash way according to the naturalistic method of The Hague School. But the sequences of painting within the young dog's coat is razor-sharp; if in part of the painting Mondrian was still a student looking for his own voice, in the main subject he was already in sturdy command.

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[218] A12 Puppy, 1891, oil on canvas, 52 x 40 cm, private collection.
[219] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 152.

XIV

Once the family learned that Piet had passed the exams, Pieter Mondriaan wrote the Queen Regent requesting a royal subsidy for his son to study art at the national academy in Amsterdam.

Some writers would report that it was Mondrian himself who wrote the Queen Regent.[220] To maintain the myth of the brave young soul combatting and overcoming the authority of a tyrannical parent to fulfill his forbidden dream, it would not do to report the facts accurately. But the actual letter still exists, in the Royal House Archive, and it was Mondrian's father who wrote it on behalf of his son and sent it on February 27, 1892.[221] Asking that his son be given financial aid, the headmaster praised his son's diligence 'For four years without a break, he [Piet] has pushed himself, taught himself. But he is only too conscious of the fact that he will not be able to persevere on his artistic path without extreme difficulties, even if he is permitted to practice his talents more fully than in the fashion authorized by those about him.'[222] Maybe in the privacy of the family's home in Winterswijk, Pieter Mondriaan argued with his son's wish to keep studying art rather than become a teacher right away, but not only did he champion the move, but, in referring to 'those about him' whose artistic 'fashion' was inadequate if Piet were to push his talents further, he can only have meant himself, his wife, and Frits. Pieter Mondriaan was not just ready for his son to have wings, but recognized his own limitations in having that happen.

Having closely observed Mondrian's obsessive dedication to his own art making, Pieter Mondriaan may have recognized that there was little chance that the boy would succeed as a teacher. He also may have had the wisdom to see that Piet did not have the right sort of personality to be an effective teacher—he was too insular and too focused on his own desires more than anyone else's needs or aspirations—and that his son's eye obsession was an eccentricity that would not bode well for students. Beseeching the Queen Regent to grant the stipend that was essential to cover the cost of tuition at what was the greatest art school in the country, Pieter Mondriaan had relented entirely from his earlier stance. Piet's diligence and tenacity had turned him around. He would do everything he can to help his son, now nearly twenty years old, realize his own fate. And possibly Mondrian's

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[220] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 169; Welsh, *CR I,* p. 116.

[221] Letter Piet Mondrian to Her Majesty, the Regent, February 27 1892, Koninklijk Huisarchief, inv.nr. A47-X-87 nr. 297. This letter is signed with P.C. Mondriaan Jr. but the handwriting is most likely his father's.

[222] Letter Piet Mondrian to Her Majesty, the Regent, February 27 1892. As translated in: Hans Janssen and Joop M. Joosten, *Mondrian 1892-1914. The Path to Abstraction*, Waanders Publishers, Zwolle; Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth 2002, p. 29. Janssen and Joosten say that this letter from Piet Mondrian was 'very probably written by his father', p. 29, note 6.

parents both recognized that, no matter how, it was high time that Piet moved out of the house.

#

The Queen Regent was the German-born Adelheid Emma Wilhelmina Theresia, Princess of Waldeck and Pyrmont. In 1879, at age twenty-one, she had married the Dutch king, Willem III, forty-one years her senior.

Two years earlier, Willem's first wife, Princess Sophie of Württemberg, had died. Following her death, Willem had unsuccessfully pursued Princess Thyra of Denmark. He had then gone after, and been rejected by Princess Pauline of Waldeck and Pyrmont. But her sister Emma, with her eye on the future more than the present, had willingly taken the hand of the infamous debauchee who was old enough to be her grandfather, whose family had ruled the Netherlands for centuries.[223]

The year after they married, Willem and Emma had a daughter, Wilhelmina. When Willem died in 1890, predeceased by the three sons he and Sophie had had, Wilhelmina was the late king's only surviving child. She inherited the position of ruler, but, since she was underage, her mother functioned as Queen Regent, a position she would retain until Wilhelmina's eighteenth birthday in 1898.[224]

It was up to Emma to waive the tuition fees for students at the Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, a national institution which operated under monarchical authority. When Mondrian's father wrote her on February 27, 1892, what he meant by a stipend was an agreement that his son would have to pay no fees—which in effect meant his having full scholarship. Doing everything he could to help his son, Pieter Mondriaan strengthened his case, by enclosing a glowing reference letter from Jan Braet von Überfeldt.

Pieter's tactics worked. Three days later, on March 1—it was a leap year—Mondrian received a yes from the Queen Regent that she was willing to pay the course costs, were he to be accepted at the Rijksakademie.[225] The next step, however, was for Mondrian to pass one more set of exams to obtain the further degree required for admission to the renowned art school.

Preparing to take those tests at the end of the summer, Mondrian did a number of small paintings of farm buildings and farm life. He made pictures of women peeling potatoes and working at their spindles, of sheaves of rye, and of the local streams and woods. The canvases, while not major, have the mix of gravitas and charm that was becoming his hallmark. A sharper intelligence and a deeper sense of pleasure are at work here than in many similar pictures of the same subject matter by less distinguished

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[223] Dik van der Meulen, *Koning Willem III 1817-1890*, Boom, Amsterdam 2013, p. 538-539; 542-553.

[224] Van der Meulen, *Koning Willem III*, p. 591-592; 612-613.

[225] The letter from February 27 1892 has a note written on it, about the answer to be given, March 1 1892, Koninklijk Huisarchief, inv.nr. A47-X-87 nr. 297.

painters. When Mondrian wraps a white kerchief around a woman's head, he does it so that you feel the pull of the material. The rye glistens in the sunlight while the bundles into which it has been tied hold their shape impeccably. The streams flow palpably and reflect the dense foliage of the trees on their banks so that we can feel the coolness of the shade and smell the particular air of woods with fresh water running through them.

At the end of August, Mondrian returned to Amsterdam to sit for the initial series of examinations. The setting for these tests was the Rijksmuseum. There could have been no more auspicious location for this grueling five-day process which he hoped would give him the advanced degree which promised to change his life. A week later, he had to reappear there for two more days of tests. A committee of academicians—W.B.G. Molkenboer was still its president—reviewed the candidates' performances throughout both stages of the process.[226]

The tests were intense and exacting. Mondrian had to draw flowers, leaves, the human skeleton, and human musculature in correct anatomical detail. He made highly specific studies to demonstrate his knowledge of perspective. He did elaborate sketches to prove his ability to use light and shade to build three-dimensional form convincingly. He also wrote and illustrated essays on various topics, among them a history of ornamental styles, in which it was necessary to say what motifs appeared in what time periods.[227]

When the results of the demanding process were announced, an even smaller percentage of students passed than for the primary school teaching exam he had taken two years earlier. Of the eighty-one people who took the tests, Mondrian was one of thirty-five candidates to make the grade.

Michel Seuphor relates a strange story, citing Carel Mondriaan as its source. Just after he was victorious with this second battery of tests, Piet went, his two certificates in hand, to a small town where he knew there was a vacant position for a schoolteacher. 'But when he saw from afar the dark building in which he would have to teach, the candidate became frightened, turned around and fled.'[228] If true, it's the only occasion of Mondrian even considering the possibility of teaching. His reason for slaving away to earn that second certificate had been clear from the start. Even if it technically allowed him to work at a secondary school level in any school in the Netherlands, he had sought it because it enabled him automatically to matriculate at the Rijksakademie, and from there to become a full-time professional painter. It was all that he wanted in life.

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[226] Welsh, *CR I,* p. 116.
[227] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 167; Welsh, *CR I*, p. 116.
[228] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 45.

XV

It seemed that everything was set. Having passed the battery of admissions tests and been awarded a stipend from the Queen Regent, Mondrian was not only ready to start at the Academy when the school year began in the fall of 1892, but was doing so with the support of a devoted family. But then something occurred that would be the beginning of a lifelong pattern. He got stopped in his tracks by a bureaucratic nightmare.

Mondrian's hard-earned diploma as a drawing teacher exempted him from easier entrance exams specific to admissions to the Academy; no one questioned this. But August Allebé, the director, had not gone through the necessary protocol to get Mondrian onto the roster of incoming students. In his pocket diary, Allebé had, on each day of the week of September 13, made an entry that he should answer a letter concerning Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan's starting classes, yet never followed his instructions to himself. The academic year began, but Mondrian's name was not on the list of students allowed into the classroom. Mondrian managed to secure an appointment with Allebé on October 15, and the following day Allebé chided himself in his diary for not having taken the action necessary for Mondrian to start. Yet on October 20 the Academy Director again berated himself for the same reason, without resolving the problem, which remained unidentified. [229]

Again, Mondrian's father stepped in. Pieter Mondriaan wrote Allebé requesting 'the rules and regulations' of the Academy in hopes of understanding what was needed so that Piet could stop idling his time and be permitted into the classroom. The letter from Winterswijk was polite and tactful, if awkward since Pieter Mondriaan did not even know what the impediment was. He simply explained to the school director that he hoped to help his son structure his new life as quickly as possible.[230] That letter from Mondrian's father succeeded in spurring the recalcitrant Allebé to action. The Academy did not yet have an official ratification of Mondrian's acceptance, stamped and sealed. Allebé obtained and processed the document at last and passed it to the administrative office where it was required to get Mondrian's name on the right list.

Or so it seemed. Even then, there was still some missing paperwork. The Rijkacademie required a "certificate of good behavior" duly notarized by the officials of Mondrian's home town. It was the equivalent of FBI clearance showing that an American citizen does not have a criminal record. Again, Pieter Mondriaan was his son's aide-de-camp, getting the mayor and

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[229] Marty Bax 'Mondriaan en zijn vrienden', in: Welsh, Robert; Bakker, Boudewijn; Bax, Marty, *1892/1912 Mondriaan aan de Amstel*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 1994, p. 24, note 5.

[230] Letter from P.C. Mondriaan sr. to August Allebé, October 21, 1892, as quoted in: Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 105.

aldermen of Winterswijk to sign the requisite document. Covering the time period April 13, 1880 to October 24, 1892,[231] it testified to the lack of criminality of Piet Mondrian from the age of eight to nineteen and a half.

Mondrian's father had already found him a place to live where he would be well taken care of and given decent meals. On November 7, Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan registered as a citizen of Amsterdam, and with the term nearly half over, at last walked into the classroom of the Rijksakademie.[232]

[231] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 116.

[232] Mondrian was number 437 in the students registration of the Rijksakademie voor beeldende kunsten in Amsterdam. Archief Rijksakademie van beeldende kunsten, toegangsnummer 90 inv.nr. 175, Noord-Hollands Archief, Haarlem.

Amsterdam

I

The change in Mondrian's existence was, on the surface, day and night. In Winterswijk, as in Amersfoort, he lived in the shadow of a father who was on of the most important figures in the community. In the quiet and remote enclaves where he was raised, his family noticed every time he went in or out of the house, and most of the townspeople he passed on the narrow streets recognized him. Life in the big city was the polar opposite.

His goals and priorities had not, however, changed an iota. It seemed that nothing could distract him from developing his art. He had the chance, for the first time in his life, of anonymity, and the city offered infinite diversion, but, at least in public, his comportment was as it had always been. He essentially kept to himself and worked on his drawing and painting.

Amsterdam in 1892 was a booming city of about half a million people. Much of the population was revelling in the new prosperity thanks to the recent growth of industry. Sugar refining and beer brewing had taken off, and the upper echelon of society, either ran the new companies or thrived in the fields of trading, shipping, and banking that served them. The enormous Central Railroad Station, which had been completed five years prior to Mondrian's arrival, brought visitors not just from all over the Netherlands, but from everycountry on the European continent.[233]

Amsterdam's return to wealth enabled it again to become an art center of international importance, as it had been in the seventeenth century. The national art academy to which Mondrian had been admitted, had, in 1875, moved to elaborate new headquarters at the Stadhouderskade that befit its monarchical sponsorship. In 1885, the Rijksmuseum, a national museum, also under the aegis of the royal family, opened. Its collection included masterpieces by Rembrandt, Vermeer, Hals, and other Dutch masters. In 1888, the Concertgebouw had inaugurated its impressive concert hall, and work had begun on *Het Stedelijk*, a museum intended for recent and contemporary art and scheduled to open in 1895. The city was also a flourishing publishing center; daily newspapers and weekly magazines rolled off the presses in abundance, and new books appeared all the time.

Painters were national heroes. One knew this just by walking around. There were city streets named Ruysdaelkade, Saenredamstraat, Jan Steenstraat, and Albert Cuypstraat; one neighborhood in the city center was the Rembrandtplein, and another was the Johannes Vermeer plein. The

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[233] Peter Paul de Baar, 'Een stad in beweging: Amsterdam 1892-1912', in: Robert Welsh; Boudewijn Bakker; Marty Bax, *1892/1912 Mondriaan aan de Amstel*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 1994, p. 8.

making of art was revered in a way unequaled anywhere else in the world; pictures were deemed essential rather than peripheral to earthly existence.

Around 1885 a bunch of young artists, such as George Hendrik Breitner and Isaac Israëls, gather in Amsterdam to visit the Rijksakademie. These painters of the so-called 'Tachtigers' (=Eighties) followed the path taken by their predecessors of the Hague School. Yet their choice of subject and way of painting is completely different. These Amsterdam painters chose to portray the modernity of their own city and became leading painters in the 1880's and 90's.[234]

Pieter Mondriaan had made sure that his twenty-year old namesake had a safe and secure situation amidst the wilds of the big city. The schoolmaster had maintained his connection with a mutual friend of his and Abraham Kuypers's even after he broke with Kuypers in 1886. J.A. Wormser ran two publishing houses and the bookstores connected to them. He owned the one which specialized in books pertaining to the beliefs of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands, while the other, which was owned by Wormser's father-in-law, Henricus Höveker, had books promulgating the views of the Dutch Reformed Church. Initially, they had been part of a single publishing house, with Höveker and Wormser as partners. But then the schism erupted between the sects, and Höveker forced Wormser to go off on his own to maintain a strict separateness between the literature of the two faiths. When Höveker had died in 1889, with his daughter as his heiress, Wormser had become responsible for both companies. In 1892, he reunited the two houses in a lovely three-story building at Kalverstraat 154, the most fashionable shopping street in Amsterdam.[235] Two of Wormser's sons, Johan Adam and Henry, ran the companies that had been their grandfather's. They lived in an apartment above the bookstore (Fig. 6).

Pieter Mondriaan arranged for Mondrian to move in with the Wormser brothers, who lived with their housekeeper, another servant, and one of their shop assistants.[236] The Rijksakademie was about a twenty-minute walk away, making this an ideal locale for Mondrian once he began his studies on November 7. Mondrian would live comfortably in this well-situated apartment for the next three years in Amsterdam; his father could not have made much better provisions.

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[234] Frouke van Dijke, 'Voorsteden en achterbuurten. De sensatie van de stad', in: Frouke van Dijke (red.), *Rumoer in de stad. De schilders van Tachtig*, WBooks/Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 2017, p. 8- 26, 232.

[235] Nel J. Hoek, 'Wormser jr., Johan Adam', in: P.J. Meertens [ed.], *Biografisch woordenboek van het socialisme en de arbeidersbeweging in Nederland* (1992)5, (https://socialhistory.org/bwsa/biografie/wormser).

[236] J.P. Verhave, 'Johan Adam Wormser (1845-1916) Uitgever-boekhandelaar en strijder tegen conservatisme van alle gading', in: Paul E. Werkman en Rolf E. van der Woude (red.), *Geloof in eigen zaak. Markante protestantse werkgevers in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw*, Verloren, Hilversum 2006, p. 171. Cf. Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 24.

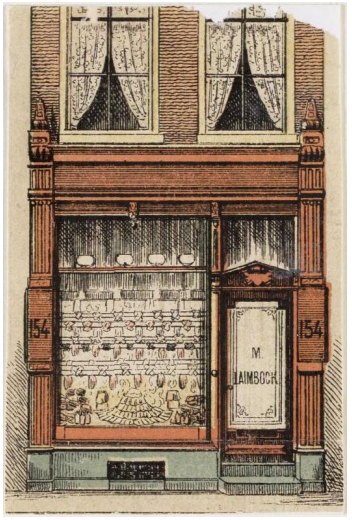

Fig. 6. Kalverstraat 154, c. 1884-1890,
Gemeentearchief Amsterdam

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In the interview Mondrian gave the American Jay Bradley in 1944—neither the journalist nor the artist having any reason to suspect that Mondrian would die unexpectedly within a month and that this would be his last public statement—not only does Mondrian say that his father discouraged him from becoming an artist and lacked the money to pay for his studies, wanting him to get a paying job as a teacher of drawing in the secondary school system, but he refers to an unnamed benefactor who supported him while he was at the Rijksakademie. 'I clung to my art ambitions, and that was my father's sorrow. Another man paid for my studies for three years.'[237] Herbert Henkels shortens the time period of the mysterious stipend, but writes that Mondrian's tuition for the first year at the Rijksakademie was paid by an unknown benefactor, Mondrian having been turned down when he applied initially for a grant from the Royal Family.[238]

None of this was so. The archives of the Royal House make clear that an initial rejection from the Queen Regent, while real, was followed within a month by her agreeing to the grant request—after receiving the letter from Mondrian's father, well before Mondrian even moved to Amsterdam to start his first year at the academy.[239] Mondrian received grants for the subsequent years as well—in addition to which he soon began to make money doing

[237] Bradley, *Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 17-18.
[238] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 169.
[239] Koninklijk Huisarchief Den Haag, Inv.nr. A47-X-87 nrs. 297 & 315, A47-X-94 nr. 1525, A47-X-101 nr. 1057, A47-X-105 nr. 1706.

portraits, selling copies of paintings at the Rijksmuseum, and receiving other commissions.

Perhaps the person Mondrian refers to as "another man" was J.A. Wormser. Wormser made things substantially easier by providing a roof over the art student's head and arranging for him to have enough to eat, even if Mondrian's tuition was covered by the royal grant.

The only sign of a difference between Mondrian and his father is that, at the same time that he started his classes at the Rijksakademie, Mondrian began to study the catechism of the Reformed Churches of the Netherlands. In July of 1893, following nine months of attending religious classes and doing the requisite reading, he was officially admitted into the roster of the church his father opposed, and where Kuyper and Wormser were both members. Mondrian's name would be on the church register for the next twenty-two years, even after he had become in may 1909 a member of the Theosofische Vereeniging (Theosophical Society); even so, it was only deleted well after he moved from Amsterdam to Paris and church officials finally detected his long absence.[240] He never withdrew of his own accord; his membership in the other sect signified some form of independence from his father, but the way he spun his past in 1944, for whatever reasons, was mostly invention.

II

The same man who had bungled Mondrian's paperwork was one of his first teachers at the Academy. August Allebé, being an artist himself, taught 'principles of proportion and composition,' with other professors leading Mondrian's classes in painting and drawing. [241] The students made figure studies from plaster casts, in much the same way that Mondrian had done them of his own accord when he dragged the casts home from the high school in Winterswijk. But now, for the first time, he was taught to draw from live models. The incoming students were also trained to copy the Old Masters.

The program was a complete change from the deliberate naturalism Uncle Frits had practiced and taught Mondrian when they made landscapes outdoors during the summers in Winterswijk, and far more rigorous than anything he had learned with Braet von Überfeldt. The key difference was that the creative method taught at the academy depended on premeditation

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[240] See for his membership of the Reformed Churches: J.M. de Jong, 'Piet Mondriaan en de gereformeerde kerk van Amsterdam', in: *Jong Holland. Tijdschrift voor kunst en vormgeving na 1850*, 5(1989)3, p. 20-23.

[241] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 117. For the life and work of Allebé, see: Wiepke Loos and Carel van Tuyll van Serooskerken (red.), *'Waarde heer Allebé', leven en werk van August Allebé (1837-1927)*, Waanders, Zwolle 1988.

more than spontaneity. The first task in making a picture was to plan its composition carefully in advance. Students were taught to resolve the issues of symmetry and the potential for rhythm with precision before committing to their ultimate objectives. The standards were formalist, with art works organized systematically for balance and counterpoint, all of which Mondrian would ultimately reject as a mature artist when he eschewed foreknowledge and rules of measure with the same yoy and liberation that boogie woogie went beyond the melodic systems of earlier jazz music, but this idea he learned at the Academy of a starting point and a rough initial plan would always underlie Mondrian's art, even if he would fly with it having, in any case, abandoned all wish for naturalistic representation as the component of art that it was back then in the 1890s.

For now, starting at the Academy, Mondrian was content to be educated in artistic techniques pretty much as they had been taught for several centuries. Then, on December 17 1892, a major Van Gogh exhibition went up at the Kunstzaal Panorama, a local exhibition space. Having been in Amsterdam for all of six weeks, and followed the rules diligently, Mondrian suddenly had his eyes opened to an artistic bravery and originality, he had never remotely imagined.

The Van Gogh show that had such an impact on the young Mondrian remained on view through January 5 of the following year. It was organized by a courageous twenty-four-year-old writer and painter, Richard Nicolaüs Roland Holst, who had completed his studies at the Rijksakademie two years previously. Roland Holst did all this on request of and in close consultation with Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, widow of Vincent's brother Theo. In presenting the late work from France of this Dutch artist who had died two years earlier at the age of thirty-seven, Roland Holst took a major risk. Van Gogh's work was still widely mocked by the general public, and there were people who considered its exposition a criminal act. Roland Holst's catalogue essay based the onus of these paintings on their lack of commercial viability; he wrote that it was because Van Gogh's work was 'art that does not sell' that most people regarded it 'as non art.'[242] He characterized these unsaleable paintings as having, on the other hand, a 'valuable spiritual' content. Roland Holst warned that the show would 'put off all those people whose taste is generally catered for in the official exhibitions,' but advised that it would appeal to the few people who comprehended it and would also educate those who 'persisted in doubting his glorious achievement.'[243]

Roland Holst's predictions about the viewers who would be put off were more accurate than about potential fans for Van Gogh. One prominent

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[242] Roland Holst, R.N., *Tentoonstelling der nagelaten werken van Vincent van Gogh*, Panorama, Amsterdam 1892.
[243] Roland Holst, R.N., *Tentoonstelling der nagelaten werken van Vincent van Gogh*, Panorama, Amsterdam 1892.

critic, David van der Kellen Jr., wrote that visitors to the Van Gogh show would regret having paid twenty-five cents to see the hundred and four 'dreadfully garish things, which don't resemble nature in the least.'[244] This popular pundit in one of Amsterdam's major daily newspapers attacked Roland Holst's essay, declaring the notion of Van Gogh's 'having achieved his aim with glory as absurd, unless that aim were to create something that is repellent to a healthy eye and healthy mind.'[245] He declared that the best approach to Van Gogh's art was not to look at it.

When this conservative critic wrote that these paintings a native son had done in France represented a 'sickness of the mind' which made it impossible 'to create healthy work,' readers concurred. 'The artist' was 'mentally ill,' and his 'abominable' later work would only 'produce instead of enjoyment only headache.'[246]

Mondrian could scarcely have imagined that the same things, practically verbatim, would be said about him and his psychological health under similar circumstances fifteen years later.[247]

The source of the most violent opprobrium was the fantastic paintings Van Gogh made when he was living in southern France and finally at the insane asylum at St. Rémy. Mondrian, like everyone else who visited the show had never before seen anything like them. But like most of the other people looking at these canvases at the Kunstzaal Panorama, he thrilled to this unprecedented vision. Van Gogh's horizontal double-square landscapes present, close-up, crows flying low above the rolling fields of Province, as well as panoramas of vibrant setting suns and of storms where the rain is palpable. His portraits of that period are in the same vivid colors, their scarlets and lime-greens animating the sitters' personalities. Van Gogh had taken painting into unprecedented territory. This approach that terrified the majority of viewers captivated the young visitor who had only recently arrived from the Netherlands' most remote and unsophisticated corner. In addition to the boldly colored and utterly original paintings, the simple framing strips—which Roland Holst had deliberately used to get away from the usual "masterpiece" idea—inspiring for Mondrian. The candor and simplicity of both the art and its presentation, and the courage to make it, suggested possibilities he had not previously imagined.

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Albert van den Briel tells us that, discussing Van Gogh's significance for him, 'M intuited very well that, in certain periods, there is a connection

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[244] D.v.d.K.Jr [David van der Kellen Jr.], in "Het nieuws van den Dag". *Kleine Courant* 26 december 1892.
[245] D.v.d.K.Jr, in "Het nieuws van den Dag". *Kleine Courant* 26 december 1892.
[246] D.v.d.K.Jr, in "Het nieuws van den Dag". *Kleine Courant* 26 december 1892.
[247] Cf. Frederik van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval in kunst', in: *Op de Hoogte. Maandschrift voor de huiskamer,* 6(1909)2, p. 79-85.

between their works, without understanding why.'[248] Mondrian in general was not interested in the avant-garde painting being done by some of his contemporaries.[249] Although Van Gogh had only died three years earlier, Mondrian regarded him as a historical figure who had made vital breakthroughs. He and Van Gogh were from different time periods and had dissimilar personalities, but Van den Briel tells us that Mondrian emphasized his, and Van Gogh's similar objectives. He wanted to get beyond Van Gogh's style to something lighter and more elegant, but Van Gogh had paved the way.

Van den Briel also reports that what was most important for Mondrian in Van Gogh was 'the social compassion.' Van Gogh's paintings like *The Potato Eaters* moved Mondrian by the depth of feeling 'not so much for the masses, for everyman, as for the individual he happened to encounter *Nootje* for the Passionflower, Hannes van Nistelrode. A brief encounter like for the opening of a flower.'[250]

Mondrian's closest friend was referring to a young woman, thought to be a prostitute, Mondrian would portray a few years hence, and to a farmer in Brabant who, in his bluntness and warmth, would have a transformative impact on Mondrian. Van den Briel continues, 'Humanity was always behind him when he painted, and attended him in the search for the right proportions of lines and planes. Something similar applied to Van Gogh. But Van Gogh did not succeed in rising above the tragic, whereas Mondrian did, as is shown by his compositions.'[251] In making that distinction, the friend who spent a year with Mondrian in the company of uneducated farmers gleaned with great acumen an utterly essential difference between Mondrian and the most innovative Dutch artist of the previous generation. Mondrian loved Van Gogh's animation, the adventurousness of his colors, the willingness to discard traditional representation of space and people and objects in deference to the intoxicating power of painting itself, but Mondrian's greatest ambition was to surmount the inherent tragedy of life, and find solutions for problems that ultimately got the better of Van Gogh.

They were, by the way, distantly related. We can trace both Vincent van Gogh and Piet Mondriaan back to their distant ancestors (6 generations back), via the early eighteenth century couple of David van Gogh and Alida Vermeulen, married in 1716. The branching takes place with their children,

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[248] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, RKD #0632, inv.nr. 2.

[249] Blotkamp points out that Mondrian did not confront himself with Dutch avant-garde contemporaries. Blotkamp, *Mondriaan in detail*, p. 15.

[250] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, RKD #0632, inv.nr. 2.

[251] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, RKD #0632, inv.nr. 2.

one family group leads to Van Gogh, another leads to Mondriaan.[252] But Mondrian appears never to have known this, and, even if he had done so, it would have made no difference to him at all. Art itself, and the world at large, were what counted, not one's bloodlines.

III

The first canvas Mondrian painted after enrolling in the art academy is a still-life of herring.[253] Dated January of 1893, it makes its subject knowable, real, and completely impersonal. Mondrian concentrated on the hard truths of physical matter, yet because of the humble nature of the fish, a simple nutritional staple in many cultures, it has an understated spiritual side that is consonant with his later abstractions.

As in the still-lifes he painted in Winterswijk, he upheld the tradition of the Dutch still-life masters and Chardin, but he was already showing the benefits of his instruction at the Academy. Mondrian displayed a new capacity to use light and dark to model demanding subject matter. The fish with amorphous shapes and the open vessels are all plausible. Some of the herrings lie inert, contained in the copper pot that is the dominant element of the painting. Others of the slithery fish cascade out of it. The viewer is convinced that, whatever their position, they all have weight; they are not just paint on canvas. The inside of the hand-beaten pot reflects precisely the sort of light, that bounces off of metal, while the wooden barrel tilted against it has a more muted sheen. The copper is palpably thin, strong and finely tooled; the wood has all the properties indigenous to that wonderful material cut from trees.

In this still-life which Mondrian painted at age twenty, it isn't only the stone and copper that seem real. The halved oranges read so true that we know the precise texture of the membranes separating their segments and of their pith and rind. The handle of the knife—part of it in sharp light, the rest in shadow—is authentically wooden, while the blade, with one bright streak of illumination along its edge, has the density and sharpness of steel.

Beyond deploying light effectively and rendering materials and objects convincingly, Mondrian imbues the overall assemblage with rhythm. Composing with curves and straight lines and working colors against one another, he animates all that is allegedly "still." That movement—and the assuredness and unboastful confidence that are apparent in his handling of

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[252] H.L. Kruimel, 'Vincent van Gogh en Josina Bijlevelt. Stamouders van vele kunstenaars', in: *Gens Nostra. Maandblad der Nederlandse genealogische vereniging*, 28(1973), p. 224-229.

[253] A23 Still Life; Herring, 1893, oil on canvas, 66,5 x 77,5 cm, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam.

difficult surfaces—gives the canvas the energy and robustness that would become Mondrian's hallmarks.

It is an interesting performance. Reality and truthfulness underlie every detail. The pot and barrel sit on a hard and substantial stone ledge of which we readily apprehend the texture and density. As the young Mondrian's canvas is a depiction of objects, both natural and manmade, it testifies to the power of light. That weightless wonder provides information about each element of the canvas, facilitating vision and possessed of a spiritual force.

Mondrian may merely have been doing the expected exercise of a first-year student, but he had a rare will toward concision. Over the next few years he would focus on the ordinary subjects favored by many Hague School painters and exhibited by the art societies that proliferated all over the Netherlands, but he would render laundry hanging in courtyards, farm buildings, sheds alongside a river, apples and ginger pots on a tablecloth, and the other usual themes with exceptional flare. His paintings are both animated and compact; he has concentrated his prodigious energy to give everyday sights their verity.

#

Mondrian lived a singular existence, mostly denying himself the range of pleasures available in the metropolis, and his dedication to his work paid off. Whether he focused on painting in order to avoid something that made him uncomfortable—or, rather, made difficult sacrifices because he recognized that they were essential for him to excel in his art that mattered more than himself—he essentially established the priorities he would maintain lifelong.

Approaching the age of twenty-one, he generally opted for solitude, yet he tended to accept social invitations while never making them. Most of his encounters with other people pertained directly to his work. The major cities in the Netherlands all had artists' organizations that organized annual exhibitions, and Mondrian had already joined one of them even before moving to Amsterdam, the Genootschap Kunstliefde in Utrecht.[254] In the spring of his first year at the Academy, Mondrian submitted his still-life of herrings to their annual exhibition.[255] The anonymous critic called "e" of Utrecht's daily newspaper, however, was aghast at his subject matter: 'Herring from the pickle barrel and a green bowl! It is surely not so difficult

[254] Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen van wege het Genootschap Kunstliefde. Utrecht: gebouw voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen, April 17 – May 1, 1892. Mondrian had five paintings included in the show. Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 22.

[255] Tentoonstelling van Schilderijen van wege het Genootschap Kunstliefde. Utrecht: gebouw voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen, April 1893. Contrary to the year before, Mondrian only submitted one painting: A23 Still Life; Herring, 1893. Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 22.

to treat more pleasing subjects with equal adroitness?'[256] The writer allowed that the still-life was 'well-executed,' but in failing to respect that Mondrian's choice was fascinating in its nature and challenging to paint, he exemplified the preference for inoffensive, trite prettiness that prevailed throughout the Netherlands in which Mondrian, like Van Gogh, had instincts that were not only atypical, but that most people took as a personal affront, deliberately offensive.[257]

Two days later, a critic for a different local paper, referring to what Mondrian had shown of his Winterswijk work in the Utrecht Kunstliefde's annual show the previous year, noted an improvement since the young artist had started at the academy, but damned with faint praise. The writer describes Mondrian as 'more modest than last year'—'modest' being a compliment, since the still-life of herrings was 'better' than his earlier work. 'There is more of an idea in his brownish light, and the unity is much better precisely for this reason.'[258] With such begrudging approval, Mondrian's hopes that he would sell the painting were dashed; all that mattered to the public was the degree to which a young artist's work held up to the prevailing taste. No one, either the art-viewing public or Mondrian's teachers, put any value on his originality.

At the end of the 1892-93 academic year, Mondrian's grade for the painting class was a desultory 'effort very good, talent rather good.'[259] He remained determined to devote his life to art, but only because he wanted to do so—not because anyone else encouraged him to think he was exceptional.

IV

Mondrian again received a royal grant for his second year of study.[260] By now, August Allebé had become his advisor. The school director urged Mondrian toward a career as a portrait and genre painter, maintaining that if he really wanted to make a living as an artist, this was just about the only way.[261] Even if Mondrian had other ideas in mind, he complied willingly, declaring this his goal and followed the requisite program. He spent twenty-

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[256] "e." in: *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, April 27 1893, as quoted in: Welsh 1998, p.161.
[257] "e." in: *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*, April 27 1893, as quoted in: Welsh 1998, p.161.
[258] "BAR.", in: *Utrechtsche Courant*, April 29, 1893, as quoted in: Welsh 1998, p.161.
[259] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 117.
[260] Letter Piet Mondrian to Her Majesty, the Regent, July 6 1893, Koninklijk Huisarchief, inv.nr. A47-101 nr. 1057.
[261] Letter August Allebé to Jhr. S.M.S de Ranitz, October 21 1893, Koninklijk Huisarchief, inv.n.r A47-X nr. 105.

eight hours a week in the classroom painting people, both nude and clothed, and animals. Again his grade for 'effort' was 'very good,' while his 'talent' went up a notch to 'good.'[262]

Meanwhile, unlike August Allebé, Pieter Mondriaan did not want to see his son squandering his talent solely on embellishments for rich people's houses. Rather, the twenty-one-year-old should use his new artistry in the service of God. The school Pieter Mondriaan headed in Winterswijk, was soon to have its twenty-fifth anniversary. Mondrian's father decided to celebrate the event by designing a canvas that his son would come home from Amsterdam to paint. The father devised the overall scheme for the semi-circular Christian allegory entitled *Thy Word is the Truth*, and drew it in outline on the canvas that measured a hundred and fifty by two hundred and fifty centimeters.[263] It would be Piet's task to apply color and use his new skills at shading and tonality to bring the complex scenario to life.[264]

Along the circular top, "Thy Word is the Truth" (in Dutch) is written in a sort of Gothic lettering. Pieter Mondriaan was determined to re-enforce the belief that all wisdom comes from God Himself, and everything that matters has been declared by Him to the world through Jesus Christ as his spokesman; the imagery below illustrates this message. Pieter Mondriaan had originally written a longer text in smaller lettering—'I am persuaded that neither life, nor things present nor things to come'—which is still partially visible, and entirely legible with the modern technology of ultra-violet light.[265] When either he or Piet opted for the shorter, four-word statement, they probably assumed that the people looking at the canvas would understand the reference to the entire text of verses 38/39 from Romans 8: 'For I am persuaded that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.'[266] The composition illustrates that faith in God through Jesus is superior to all other forces in human existence. In the middle of the canvas, there is a Bible that is open to Paul's epistle to the Romans 5:1. It reads: 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith

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[262] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 117.

[263] A11 Thy Word is the Truth, 1894, Oil on canvass, 150 x 250 cm, collectie scholengroep Accent Aalten.

[264] Herbert Henkels, *Mondriaan in Winterswijk. Een essay over de jeugd van Mondriaan, z'n vader en z'n oom.*, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 1979, p. 28-30. Cf. Welsh, *CR* I, p. 151: 'According to tradition [it] had been painted by P.C. Mondriaan Senior. Henkels, however, has convincingly argued that Mondriaan Senior doubtless supplied the overall iconography and specific motifs […] but that the execution in oil could only have been done by Mondriaan Junior.'

[265] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 151.

[266] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 151.

into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God.' The open Bible lies on a plain wooden cross, or at least is meant to; the combination of Mondriaan father and son had not mastered spatial depth, and in effect the Bible floats in front of the object on which it allegedly rests. Scattered around the weightless book and mid-positioned cross, also unaffected by gravity, a scythe, to represent death; an elaborate hourglass, to suggest the passage of time; an anchor, to embody hope; and palm branches, to symbolize victory. The emblem of sincerity, a white dove, is perched on the palm frond; if it too appears as if it might fly off, at least in its case that ability to defy gravity is appropriate. A red curtain is drawn back with a theatrical flourish behind part of this conglomeration of objects. The rest of the background is the sky, blue on the top, with orange clouds below it. Possibly they indicate a sunrise, or else an enormous conflagration. A swallow, flying in from the upper right, symbolizes restless wandering. That uncertain search that will be fulfilled only with faith; presumably the people looking at 'Thy Word is Truth' were all sufficiently well-versed in biblical iconography to know that. Even if they did not automatically understand what everything meant, the public was given a chance. The Minutes of the School Board Meeting held on January 31, 1894 include the statement that 'Mr. Mondriaan explained his son's painting and recited a poem.'[267] Identifying the symbols, Pieter Mondriaan elucidated what he declared the great achievement of twenty-two-year-old Piet as a result of his professional training. Mondrian had worked hard on the father/son collaboration during his visits to Winterswijk. His willingness to join his father in expressing the idea of faith as salvation—like so much else, at odds with the subsequent myth of their underlying conflict—was more than an effort to please. Mondrian shared his father's determination for humankind to achieve spiritual grace. The precise faith Mondrian would eventually endorse would not depend on Jesus as its spokesman, and he would find his own voice, but he completely had the same conviction that there was a higher truth than the small issues of everyday life.

V

Mondrian continued his studies by taking drawing classes in the evenings and doing his best to eke out a living during the days so that he could pay the fee of forty gilders to remain at school on this limited basis. Mondrian's burgeoning artistic skills helped him make enough money. The most lucrative form of painting was portraiture, and he quickly landed some commissions to do paintings of fellow members of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. He worked on these meticulously, and when his clients

[267] Minutes of the School Board Meeting, January 31 1894, as quoted in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 152.

were unavailable to pose for him, he used photographs to make the likeness as true as possible. Mondrian's first portrait of a human being—he had, after all, done a puppy—was of Dorothy Gretchen Biersteker,[268] a girl just shy of three years old. Adriaan Biersteker, the girl's father, commissioned it. Besides being a fellow sect member, Biersteker was Mondrian's dentist.[269] We don't know whether Mondrian was paid in cash or did the portrait in exchange for dental work, but he accomplished his task with aplomb. The little girl's skin is soft, her eyes crystalline. The textures and density of the materials of her clothing are subtly differentiated. The child's dress has the sheen of silk, while her ribbed stockings are palpably wooly. Both are white, their hues similar, but on the frock the white is cool and reflective, while on the stockings, it is warm and refractive. The girl's shiny Mary-Janes, her glistening bobbed hair—freshly washed and brushed—and the Persian rug draped over the table on which she has placed a pudgy little hand, all read authentically. The meticulous rendering evokes the bourgeois comfort and respectability fundamental to domestic life in late nineteenth-century Amsterdam, and Mondrian has captured it with a novelist's detail as well as a highly developed skill at handling paint. Removed from the drudgery of painting the overloaded religious allegory he had made in partnership with his father, Mondrian enjoyed the freedom to indulge his fondness for brightness and nice things. In spite of the little girl's sobriety, she and her family's visible affluence brought a new sense of simple delight to his work. It was a far cry from the fire and brimstone demonstration of God's power he had painted according to Pieter Mondriaan's dictates. Attracted by what was pleasing and positive, Mondrian now also started to paint tiles. Their smooth porcelain surfaces invited a lightness and grace in the lovely Dutch scenes he created on them; while traditional in nature, their sense of bounty was a far cry from the intimidation induced by 'Thy Word is Truth.'[270] Then Mondrian got another commission. It was for Höveker and Son, the publishing company housed right below the apartment where he lived. He was given the task of illustrating two volumes to the teaching of Christian dogma being published for distribution in South Africa. It would be a full-time job for months to come, and meant that he could move out of the digs he shared with the Wormser twins.

On April 9, 1895, when the academic year was nearly over and the drawing classes soon to end, Mondrian, for the first time in his life, started to live alone—as he would for the rest of his life. He rented an attic for himself at Ruysdaelkade 75. He knew the building because his brother Willem had briefly lived in it the previous October after returning to the Netherlands

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[268] A25 Dorothy Gretchen Biersteker, 1894, Oil on canvas, 110,5 x 75 cm, The (sure 'The' ispart of the name?) Vancouver Art Gallery.

[269] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 26. Cf. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 163.

[270] Henkels, *Mondrian,* p. 156-157. Cf. Welsh, *Early Career*, p. 181.

following a stay in Surinam, in the Dutch West Indies.[271] On another of Amsterdam's streets named for a great Dutch artist, it was behind the Rijksmuseum in a recently constructed, middle class neighborhood. Although Willem had moved to Utrecht at the end of 1894, Mondrian had liked the place in the three months when his brother lived there, and was content to find available space in its well-lit attic. Once on his own, Mondrian began to meet new people who were less hidebound than the Reformed Church of the Netherlands crowd. Only after a couple of months he moved from Ruysdaelkade to the Eerste Oosterparkstraat. He had begun work on book illustrations that took Calvinist fury to a new extreme. The images Mondrian had been commissioned to make were for *Christ's Heirs, History of the Persecution of the Christian Church.*[272] In his twenty-eight illustrations for the book, he demonstrated not just his great skill as a draftsman, but also an astonishing imagination for human tortures. Mondrian invented and articulated a fantastic array of physical punishments inflicted upon their hapless victims with steely control and fiendish delight. These gruesome sadistic images would be published as full-page plates in a handsomely bound volume. The drawings of religious persecution are far more original than that large, heavy-handed demi-lunette mural Mondrian painted for the anniversary of his father's school. This provocative early work reveals an astounding side of Mondrian.

Christ's Heirs, *History of the Persecution of the Christian Church* was one of more than two hundred and fifty books, Andrew Murray, a well-known South African pastor, writer, and teacher, had commissioned or written to convert people to Protestantism. In 1889, Murray, at age sixty-one, had been among the founders of the South African General Mission. He had studied theology at the University of Utrecht and been ordained as a Dutch Reform Minister. The main text of this book, written by D.P. Rossouw, was intended as a tool to help him spread the gospel back in his native land. Among the other titles in Murray's series are *Abide in Christ*, *Be Perfect*, *Divine Healing*, *God's Will: Our Dwelling Place*, *How to Raise Your Children for Christ*, *The Deeper Christian Life,* and *The Power of the Blood of Christ.*

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[271] Marty Bax and Robert Welsh, 'De Amsterdamse ateliers van Piet Mondriaan', in: Welsh, Robert; Bakker, Boudewijn; Bax, Marty, *1892/1912 Mondriaan aan de Amstel*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 1994, p. 45.

[272] D.P. Rossouw, *Medeërfgenamen van Christus. Geschiedenis van de vervolgingen der Christelijke Kerk. Met eene voorrede van Dr. Andrew Murray*, Höveker & Zoon, Amsterdam n.d. [1894]. This book was published simultaneously by publishing house D. Bolle in Rotterdam, with an alternative title: *Het boek der martelaren of de geschiedenis van de vervolgingen der martelaren.*

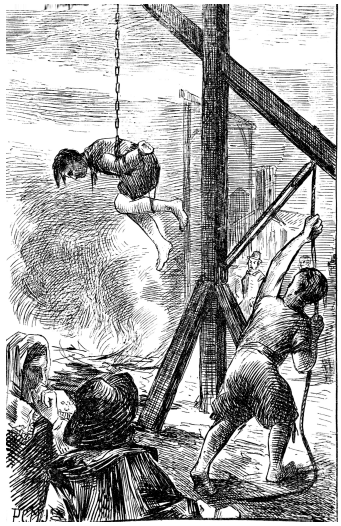

Fig. 7. Mondrian, *The Strappado*, 1894

Part of its effectiveness is because Mondrian renders this brutal scenario in the most restrained of styles. Whereas the manner with which Pieter Mondriaan drew *his* biblical scenes imbued every detail of posture and facial expression with maximum drama, in a drawing technique that accentuated the emotionalism, his son takes the opposite approach. Mondrian's carefully regulated crosshatching, sure delineation of the subject matter, and subtle use of grays and whites, reminiscent of Rembrandt's etching technique, make the violent imagery all the more upsetting, for they suggest that he can study and show the torture without batting an eyelash. The same carefully regulated working method is what makes all of the illustrations for *Christ's Heirs* so chilling. Mondrian's scene of 'Five students … burned alive' is another cool and steady drawing in which the unseen artist seems to say, "I am simply an illustrator, I am showing you all this, but will keep my feelings to myself while you come to your own conclusions." He has the same attitude as the two people he has put into the foreground: aware of the monstrous act going on behind them, probably talking about it, they register no emotional response.

One of Mondrian's illustrations, *The Strappado*, depicts a gallows-like structure from which a man, tied up as if in a bundle, is suspended while a young fellow in shorts pulls at a rope to hoist him in the air (Fig. 7). Another scene is of a man being simultaneously strangled and burned. Death by fire is a preferred subject throughout the series, with hanging from the gallows takes a close second place. All the tortures and killings are presented with the matter-of-fact technique at which the young Mondrian was so adept. In a scene of a man on the rack, one feels that what matters most of all is the way light falls on the victim's legs; like the officials (their robe and caps

suggest that they are high court judges) who look on as if they are a theatre audience, with one of them resting his weary head on his left hand, the eloquent artist seems to be an impartial observer. As we move on to more of these images, however, we come to feel that Mondrian's apparent remoteness is a ploy. By echoing, in his manner of drawing, the lassitude of the perpetrators in these heinous events, he is being deliberately ironic. In *The massacre in Ireland in 1641*—showing a man wielding an axe with which he will chop off the head of an old peasant lying on the ground and raising his arm in protest—Mondrian takes an artistic stance like Jonathan Swift's in *A Modest Proposal* (1729). His drawing style is practically languid, the picture composed with order and balance. Yet it is unlikely that Mondrian is cold or indifferent to the horrors he depicts. By rendering this and other scenes with such apparently dispassionate artistry, he makes them all the more stirring. We assume this is his deliberate intention. This biting satire that is patently the opposite of his father's hyperbolic style were effective by plan. The control served a purpose beyond its impact on the viewer. The precisely weighted strokes and overriding sense of organization in these illustrations gave Mondrian his own stability even if it astonishes anyone else looking at the heinous acts. Mondrian's carefulness and methodological approach, and his will not to register a personal response, enabled him to keep his equilibrium. His refined technique and the avoidance of emotional pain, and the consequent feeling of balance and order, would be fundamental to every phase of his future art. Mondrian's restraint, and his overarching sense of measure and control, allowed him to regulate whatever havoc there was within. I am convinced, in part because of what Mondrian wrote in letters when he let his guard down, that there were frozen emotions that are why he needed all the scaffolding and window dressing. You will see how he lived, and dealt with intimacy, his inability ever to vent true anger or to love another person openly, and decide for yourself. He could voice annoyance or affection—albeit rarely—but he showed nothing stronger in his responses to other people, even if he embraced intellectual ideas with fervor. The style of these illustrations for *Christ's Heirs*, like Mondrian's comportment in all sorts of situations, were not because Mondrian was cold-blooded, but, rather, that he had developed a manner of presentation and self-presentation that enabled him to cope with his intense sensitivity, to channel the passionate responses deep inside him, rather than be weighed down by them.

Throughout these vivid illustrations of torture and killing, Mondrian's victims epitomize innocence; fair-skinned and young, almost soft as personality types, they are guileless. Mondrian presents two prototypes among the torturers and observers. Some appear gleeful over the infliction of brutal suffering, while others recoil in horror.[273] We have to wonder if

[273] Hans Renders is the source of this and other keen observations about these illustrations, in a conversation on April 12, 2018.

the illustrator identified with the ingenues having their heads chopped off or being bound in chains, their fates controlled by people who are monstrous, either overtly or passively.

Later on in his life, when he sought pure abstraction, this deliberate manner devoid of personal revelation even if it depended on spontaneity and a happy suspension of logic, would sunder Mondrian even further from both the nineteenth-century Romantics and the twentieth-century Expressionists with their deliberate emotionalism. His desire would be to depict beauty in new ways, to avoid feelings other than joy and well-being. In these early illustrations where he presented human monstrosity, it was with the same legerdemain. Mondrian's carefully modulated voice put even the most fraught subject matter in a safe realm.

The teenage artist's main strength was as a draftsman. In about 1896, he made a black crayon drawing, *Girl with Bonnet Writing* (Fig. 8),[274] which like *Woods with Stream,* qualified him as a prodigy. In *Woods with Stream,* his vantage point is from within, as if he is under the canopy of the trees he is drawing; with *Girl Writing*, he has assumed the position of an observer at a physical distance from his subject. Of course there is no other way to do a portrait, but what is remarkable is that Mondrian has the same consuming emotional engagement with what he is depicting as in the drawing of the forest. There is a oneness between Mondrian and what is before his eyes. He *becomes* his subject.

Fig. 8. Mondrian, *Girl with Bonnet Writing*, 1896-97

[274] A123 Girl with Bonnet Writing, c.1896-97, Black crayon on paper, 57 x 44,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.

This presentation of a girl bent over her schoolwork has the total connection between the artist and his art that would apply to everything Mondrian would do right through the Boogie Woogie paintings he made at the end of his life. The surprise is that even at age eighteen Mondrian eradicated the space most artists maintain between themselves and what they put on view. Other painters step back; they are on one side of the picture surface, the subject on the other. Mondrian on the other hand, with his vigorish cross-hatching, stylistically similar to Rembrandt's, is engaged as if he and the art work are one and the same. He has no need or wish to retreat, into some other territory or to put the brakes on his feelings. The art work is his haven, the place where he is allowed to be consumed with passion.

#

Even though Mondrian was just beginning to explore the process of making pictures, in the portrait of the girl, as in the woodland scene, he knew how to maintain steely control while attaining an emotional pitch. The intensely animated crosshatching in this large drawing conveys the girl's concentration. The broad strokes which define the background, and the shorter dashes which establish the rough cotton of her dress and sash as well as the folds of the tablecloth, reveal a surcharge of awareness. Mondrian's own vitality, concentration, and imagination assume a kind of physical form in this drawing, imbuing his young subject with his own prodigious qualities.

There is, however, nothing random in the muscular force of the drawing. Mondrian, and the girl who is his subject, are fired up, but not frenzied. In about a decade, Mondrian would, for a while, paint as if in an altered state of mind, briefly producing work that is confused and confusing, as if he had lost his mastery of himself, but here, in his first-known drawing of another person, he exercises restraint, and, while vehemently engaged, captures his subject impeccably. The abstract elements of the drawing—the flurry of lines that are more about the act of drawing then the process of representation—remain in balance, composed in precise relationship to one another to achieve overall pictorial harmony. Mondrian is already using, by instinct, white space and white accents, the visual voids, to pump air into his art. The bare paper he leaves visible in this drawing of a schoolgirl evokes the omnipresent universe. It is oxygen and light, that dematerialized wonder which is essential to seeing. Its brightness seems to come from the sun that is the source of life. Even at this early stage of his artistic experimentation, Mondrian already had the perspective on earthly existence which would later underlie his more sophisticated abstract compositions, the vision whereby everything is revealed as taking place in the vast cosmos which is greater than any of us, and which is eternal while we are mortal. Here we witness, at age twenty-four, Mondrian was developing the scope and breadth that would lead him to his greatest work.

The interplay between the specific and the universal in a drawing he made at such a young age was probably not the result of a conscious plan. It reveals, nonetheless, an intuitive tendency to make the background part of the foreground, an integration whereby the setting of all life assumes greater importance than the details under observation. The subordinate role of human activity, and the summoning of a greatness larger than anything we can see, were already fundamental to his approach. As he tried to master the art of painting, the young Mondrian was becoming possessed by the spiritual luminosity that would cause his abstract art to exercise such a force of enchantment.[275]

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The white in this breakthrough drawing is not just sunlight and air. What remains untouched by crayon on the sheet of paper is also like the radiance of the girl's thoughts as she closes her eyes to focus on what she is committing to paper. Additionally, that white serves an important technical purpose. It enables the artist to realize the modeling of form, to bring one of the girl's shoulders forward and wrap a kerchief round her head.

For the rest of his life, Mondrian would use the void as a fundamental tool in the articulation of his visual subject and as the vessel in which he would locate things in three-dimensional space. This would be even more the case when that subject would be an entirely abstract configuration of horizontal and vertical straight black lines and rectangles of pure unmodulated color. The whiteness always breathes the spark of life in and has the weightless flow of a reverie.

In *Girl Writing*, Mondrian may have been responding directly to the work of one of the finest painters ever of light, Johannes Vermeer. There is no scholarly basis for that notion—neither Mondrian himself nor any of the authorities on his work has ever claimed it—but he was a regular visitor of the Rijksmuseum as he was given permission to copy several paintings in 1895.[276] Mondrian would certainly have looked at Vermeer's work while being in the museum.[277] And he would surely have seen illustrations of Vermeer's masterpieces with Braet von Überfeldt. The girl's pose, her intensity, the act of writing a letter, appear to come directly from Vermeer; the way she leans on her left forearm while resting on her right elbow is also an echo.

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[275] Cf. Nancy J. Troy, *The Afterlife of Piet Mondrian*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 2013, in which the author, among other things, looks at the popular appeal of Mondrian's instantly recognizable style in fashion, graphic design, and a vast array of consumer commodities.

[276] January 25: Mondrian is given permission to copy at the Rijksmuseum the painting by P.J.C Gabriel, *In de maand Juli*; In June Mondrian is given permission to copy paintings by B.J. Blommers, *Het Breistertje* and by P. van der Velden, *Dubbelblank*. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 117-118.

[277] By that time there were two paintings by Vermeer at the Rijksmuseum: *The Love Letter* (c.1669-1670) and *Woman Reading a Letter* (c.1663).

Mondrian could have found no better role model. The seventeenth century master had an extraordinary ability to evoke light and air. For a sensitive young artist pushing himself forward as Mondrian was, Vermeer demonstrated to perfection the craft of picture-making, and, in concord with that, a balanced vision of life nourished by powerful luminosity.

Yet there is one element which exists in Vermeer's work that is noticeably absent in Mondrian's vision of the girl writing. Mondrian was twenty-four when he made this drawing; his female subject was, it appears a couple of years younger. If he had the slightest physical attraction to her, an iota of the desire which is palpable when artists like Picasso or Modigliani made young girls their subjects, he keeps it entirely outside his artistic approach. Vermeer, disciplined and restrained as he was, invariably causes us to feel his enjoyment of his subjects' prettiness. Mondrian does not. Furthermore, one has no sense that the absence of earthly sensualism was a struggle for him.

VI

The money Mondrian made on the book illustrations gave him a leg up. Shortly after finishing, though, he was scrambling to pay his rent and cover his living expenses. His needs were modest, but he wanted to keep drawing and painting. Since he was no longer a full-time student at the Rijksakademie, he was ineligible to use its studios, and had to do a juggling act to have a space to work. For the next few years, Mondrian would perpetually change flats, sometimes having access to attic space he could use as his studio in the same building where he lived, while at other times painting in the same room in which he slept. There were brief periods when he stayed with one or another of his brothers, but they moved out of Amsterdam almost as quickly as they moved in. Where and how he lived did not matter to him so long as it gave him the chance to keep painting.

Most Dutch people of his generation were eager to settle down and raise families. Even those who were bent on artistic careers did not intend to live alone and with the barest of creature comforts. Mondrian was not like the rest of them. Still, even if Mondrian was an oddball in the same way he had been when he was growing up and living with his family, he was in a sympathetic milieu. Painters were accorded respect, and there were organizations that advanced their cause. Having joined the Genootschap Kunstliefde in Utrecht even before he had left Winterswijk, in July of 1894, following his second year at the Academy, Mondrian had joined Arti et Amicitiae – the oldest artists' society in Amsterdam.[278] Founded in 1839, with impressive headquarters on one of the city's main thoroughfares, it was governed by an older generation of traditional painters. Later, Mondrian

[278] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 117.

also joined St. Lucas, a newer organization. It had been founded in 1880 by some of the more innovative Rijksakademie students.[279] While Arti's members were mostly traditional painters with comfortable studios and a steady client base, the St. Lucas constituency tended to be politically active bohemians who lived in squalid digs.[280] Regardless of their bias, these organizations provided Mondrian with venues for presenting his latest work.

Meanwhile, the Stedelijk, the new and large museum funded by the government and devoted partly to the art of its own time, was moving toward completion. Mondrian was one of many young painters in the city inspired by the hope of having work shown there. The idea that new art was respected on a national level, its status rising, encouraged people who wanted to go off the beaten path. In other large cities with soaring economies, places like New York or even Paris, to become a painter was to choose to be an outsider; in Amsterdam, one had at least a chance of earning a decent living with this profession that elsewhere seemed like a certain path to poverty. Not only that, but in the Netherlands to opt to be an artist was a chance to enter the realm of the deities.

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In order to survive, Mondrian made saleable paintings at the Rijksmuseum and continued to give private art lessons and make commissioned portraits. He also periodically sold a landscape painting.[281]

While a lot of the competition—other young painters, the majority men, who made a living providing art for the prosperous bourgeoisie who wanted it to decorate their homes—were social gadflies, Mondrian was reserved and quite unknowable, but he was both competent and trustworthy. Tall, broad-shouldered, and trim, the handsome, young Calvinist exuded correctness. He stood erect, with the bearing and the well-organized appearance of a military officer. He was more pensive than gregarious, and his enthusiasm for painting and his quiet thoughtfulness were impressive, and his looks striking. While his three brothers were all fair-haired like their mother, Piet had a shock of his father's smooth black hair, which he wore neatly trimmed with an impeccably straight part in the middle. There was never a lock out of place, contributing to his air of assuredness and a certain bravado. Later, especially when mysticism and Theosophy consumed him, Mondrian would grow his beard to Maharischi-length, but in all photos from the first years in Amsterdam he is correctly dressed, in a starched white shirt, tie, and dark suit. Unusual for the time period, he was always clean-shaven and

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[279] For St. Lucas, see: Jenny Reynaerts, 'Vereniging en vernieuwing. Kunstenaarsverenigingen in Amsterdam in het laatste kwart van de 19de eeuw', in: *Tijdschrift voor Sociale Geschiedenis* 19(1993)1, p. 36-51.

[280] De Baar, *Een stad in beweging*, p. 19.

[281] 'To make a living I did many kinds of work […] portraits, copies of pictures in museums, and taught as well, and then I began to sell landscapes.' Bradley, *Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 18.

impeccable. Image mattered a lot to him, and since it required good clothing for him to give the impression of a gentleman, he always managed to scrape together the money.

The copies Mondrian made to keep himself in fine attire and cover his other living expenses were of work by respectable nineteenth century artists as well as the seventeenth century masters Nicolaes Maes and Jan Steen.[282] When, years later, Mondrian wrote an essay praising Steen for "going beyond 'depiction' to 'determination',"[283] he was articulating the trait that counted most for him in painting as in life.

VII

The Stedelijk Museum had existed as an institution since 1874, but it had always been housed in temporary headquarters. When it opened its impressive new building in September of 1895 on Paulus Potterstraat near both the Rijksmuseum and the Concertgebouw, with the declared purpose of showing modern and contemporary art, it was one of the first institutions in the world constructed exclusively for that purpose.[284]

Mondrian and other younger artists in Amsterdam had reason to hope that the fresh approaches they were risking in their art would be endorsed on an official level. The agenda of the Stedelijk was to foster contemporary art and, at least in theory, to encourage work at odds with the old way of doing things.[285]

Yet even with its own new headquarters, the Stedelijk was mired in tradition. The building that declared the importance of living art was a red brick Neo-Renaissance palace faced with architraves and cornices and an elaborate ornamental roof that harkened back to the sixteenth century. Its

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[282] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119-120.

[283] As paraphrased in: Yve-Alain Bois [et. al], *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944*, Bulfinch Press, Boston/New York 1994, p. 22. Original essay: *The New Plastic in Painting,* Mondrian's first published essay, in twelve installments in the first year of *De Stijl*, October 1917 –October 1918. A supplement, *The Determinate and the Indeterminate* followed in the December 1918 number. The reference to Jan Steen comes from this supplement: 'in Jan Steen the representation of objects is not simply a depiction of their visual appearance: he gives their corporeality […] some degree of determination,' Holtzman, *Collected Writings,* p. 71.

[284] John Jansen van Galen; Huib Schreurs, *Site for the Future. A Short History of the Amsterdam Stedelijk Museum, 1895-1995*, V+K Publishing, Naarden 1995, p. 7-15.

[285] 'The Van Eeghen family […] agreed to provide a sum of 150,000 guilders for the building of a museum, with the stipulation that it would be easy for Dutch artists to exhibit their work there […].' Jansen van Galen, *Stedelijk Museum*, p. 10.

design implied that the chief requisite of artistry was a recapitulation of past styles, and initially the same principle applied to the paintings and sculpture on view inside.

The institution was funded mainly by the dowager S.A. Lopez Suasso-de-Bruyn and the eminent Amsterdam businessman C.P. van Eeghen.[286] Its collections downstairs included the widow Suasso collection, militaria and objects from the Museum of Chronometry and the Medical-Pharmaceutical Museum. Upstairs, the Stedelijk showcased French Barbizon and Dutch Hague School art.[287] If in theory the world in which Mondrian was trying to make his way was supportive of groundbreaking aesthetic approaches, tradition still reigned.

For the time being, Mondrian worked in a manner that would not raise hackles. Besides the portraits, he made paintings whose subject matter and style were in keeping with the graceful naturalism that was fundamental to the Barbizon and Hague Schools. His pictures allowed viewers to imagine themselves entering sylvan forest glades, and to look at sun-dappled riverscapes in any weather. Mondrian's earlier art works had evinced a greater independence and his particular way of seeing things; now he was stuck more in the current mode. When he was at the Academy, he had painted with more mettle and flare, and the illustrations for *Christ's Heirs* had been highly original, but now he slackened his momentum and suppressed his own voice.

Periodically, lifelong, Mondrian would retreat, or move sideways in what was otherwise a course of rapid progress. He would paint as if by rote; this would happen again in the early nineteen thirties when he briefly arrived at a plateau with his pure color compositions and painted several that lacked the bravura of the work that preceded and followed them. In this first year after he had left the Academy, he went into one of these slumps. His final grades had been desultory—his work in the evening drawing class merely garnered 'effort good, talent reasonable'—with nothing being exceptional.[288] After doing *Christ's Heirs*, he went into a sort of regression, evident in a portrait he painted, based solely on photographs, of the future Queen Wilhelmina when she was about eleven years old and wearing mourning clothes following the death of her father.[289] According to Welsh, *The Young Princess* may be attributed to a feeling of indebtness by the artists for the scholarship funding Mondrian had received from Queen-Regent Emma for his tuition at the Rijksakademie.[290] A dour painting of a dour subject, Mondrian shows himself diligent and technically competent, but

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[286] Jansen van Galen, *Stedelijk Museum*, p. 7-10.
[287] Jansen van Galen, *Stedelijk Museum*, p. 21.
[288] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 118.
[289] A28 Princesje, 1896, Oil on canvas, 59,5 x 50 cm, Paleis Het Loo, Apeldoorn.
[290] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 164.

emotionally shackled, adhering to the rules of the day with the attitude of an indentured servant.

#

In march 1897, he turned twenty-five years old. He moved into a studio in the same building where two of his brothers lived on the Ringdijk, in Watergraafsmeer, a suburb of Amsterdam. Piet was on the top floor—at a corner, with windows facing in two directions—while Carel and Louis lived below on the second floor, over a café. Michel Seuphor describes it as an agreeable situation; 'they took their meals together, and got along wonderfully.'[291]

It is a delightful image, and being in Seuphor's book, has become the widespread image of Mondrian's life at the time. Seuphor, however, also calls Wormser 'Worms', and only met Mondrian some twenty-five years after the period in question.[292] Besides, Seuphor waited to write this until a decade after Mondrian's death, at which point he depended on Carel Mondriaan as his source. Carel also told Seuphor, who put it in his book, that Mondrian preferred him, the baby of the family and eight years younger than Piet, to Louis, who was 'less disposed to philosophizing.'[293] Especially since Mondrian did not yet have any close relationships beyond his natal family, the connections or lack of them, with his siblings, are of great significance, and worth trying to understand accurately if we are really to know Piet Mondrian as he emerged into his own manhood.

Seuphor's description of the brothers living in such happy camaderie rang false to me. Every other image of Mondrian, including his own letters, show him always to have been a loner, and this idea of the jolly brothers chatting merrily over breakfast, lunch, and dinner is inconsistent with Van der Briel's portrait of the sibling relationships. And Van der Briel knew Mondrian, and met the brothers, close to that time period. Of course Piet had been brought up in physical proximity to Louis and Willem and Carel, but when their shared playroom became his personal studio in the midst of the younger brother's childhood, that change signaled their differences. That Mondrian later lived in the same building as his brothers was above all a matter of convenience and economics. If their ties were as joyful as Seuphor depicts them to have been, why would they scarcely see each other again, for the rest of their lives, and why would Mondrian ultimately leave his entire estate to someone who was not even a blood relative?

If you believe, as I do, that the pull of family relationships—first, our parents and siblings; then, our spouse and children—is the determining factor of so much in life, Mondrian's relationships with his brothers is a major issue. After Mondrian died, the battle over who was Piet's favorite had begun—Louis and Johanna were no longer alive, but Willem and Carel

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[291] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 48.
[292] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 47: 'the bookseller Worms'.
[293] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 48.

were—with each brother claiming the role. Carel made the case for his top status for the rest of his life, but he had a vested interest, and no one else was left to argue.[294]

#

Mondrian tried to get away from being in the same apartment as his brothers in Watergraafsmeer almost as soon as he started living there. On June 28, he procured a certificate signed by Allebé which stated that nearly two years earlier, in August 1895, he had completed his course at the Rijksakademie 'with diligence and good results' and had subsequently returned to develop his etching technique. The document accompanied a letter to the ruling authorities saying that 'with the aim of increasing his professional chances as an artist, he now wishes to enhance his knowledge of foreign schools of art by means of a sojourn in England.'[295] It would have been his first trip beyond the Netherlands's borders.

Nothing came of Mondrian's request. But he managed to escape his brothers anyway. On December 30th, he moved back to Amsterdam, to the 3rd floor at Stadhouderskade 5.[296] On the Leidseplein, a busy square in Amsterdam, at the end of the main road to the center of town by horse tram, it was near Koepelkerk, a large church with a prominent dome. Mondrian's flat was small, and had to serve as a studio as well as a place to sleep and eat, but at least he was on his own. He began to acquire new friends, such as Cornelis van den Berg, with whom Mondrian taught drawing classes from 1895 to 1898. Van den Berg was an instructor of gymnastics and lived a few steps away from the place Mondrian had lived in in the Oosterpark. The two probably met more or less by coincidence.[297] Some other acquaintances were musicians, but most of them were artists who exhibited annually with him at Arti et Amicitiae and St. Lucas.[298] Their

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[294] My archaeological digging in a different direction uncovered some nuggets, about Mondrian and his parents' other children. I was going through the archives of Harry Holtzman [Harry Holtzman Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University]. Most of it is legal material concerning Mondrian's estate, multiple copies of some well-known magazine articles, and Holtzman's own writing. Then, in among the files of minor documents, Mondrian's brothers reappeared. My findings confirmed an impression very different from Seuphor's. Mondrian was essentially a loner, and with his natal family he was odd man out. He consciously kept his distance; he did not try to fit in more than he did. He concentrated on his art to the exclusion of everything else, and it provided a successful substitute for the emotional rapport he was incapable of achieving with other human beings.

[295] All Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119.

[296] Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers*, p. 46; Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119.

[297] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 32-34; Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, 628 note 43.

[298] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 26.

interests and way of life were far more like his own than had been his brothers'. He liked having sympathetic company at the same time that he avoided intimacy. And he was now living entirely alone, as he would for the rest of his life.

VIII

The way of life Mondrian developed for once and for all in his solo digs on Leidseplein calls to question the issue of all of his human relationships, not only those with his natal family, and the meaning of the aloneness that was absolutely essential to him for the rest of his life. His insularity, and his exceptional personal priorities, were fundamental to him. Everything about his life depended not only on his emotional distance from his natal family, but from any force or person that could possibly diminish his creative strength.

#

Harry Holtzman was an American, forty years younger than Mondrian, who admired the artist greatly, supported him in many ways at the end of his life, got him to the U.S. in October 1940, and became his sole heir. The letters he received from Mondrian's family members and other people add to all of the other evidence. Even while Mondrian had a definite notion of correct behavior, he not only never married or had children, but was essentially distant from everyone in his natal family. Piet Mondrian was never truly close to any other human being. Having combed through his friendships and presumed romances, I am just about certain that, with one possible and quite fantastic exception, Mondrian never lost any time or energy worrying about another human being or devoting himself to anyone else's needs.

Nor did he care about his own needs, other than sufficient health, food, and places to live and work, simply, so that he could do his art. Except for the chance to dance (which was an integral part of his art making in its guidance to rhythm) and to dress well (a form of ordering, and perhaps a vital façade, just as, in a way, his paintings were façades), he required next to nothing to live. He eschewed intimacy like the plague.

#

Part of what makes Piet Mondrian's great abstract compositions soar and infuse us with a sense of well-being is their quality of concentration. Nothing intrudes. There are no distractions, no appearance of neurosis. They are only what they are, rhythmic black lines crossing one another against a white background—usually one or more bright rectangle of vibrant, luminous color sparkling in the gridwork.

Their hundred percentness is an extraordinary quality, and it connects directly with Mondrian's position, starting with early childhood, continuing through the years of his development in Amsterdam and elsewhere in the Netherlands, and then in Paris, London, and New York, of true emotional

solitude, which was vital to his equanimity. He lived in a void in order to be his own master. Issues like Dutchness and the art movements around him are less relevant to a real understanding of him than is insight into his persona and the life he developed to accommodate his unusual emotional needs. Mondrian's art and writing are powerful declarations of the irrelevance of all the "context" issues. He needed to distill and intensify all the forces inside him, and eliminate any element that would impede his total focus, to flourish.

You may consider his concentration on total abstraction and his deliberate elimination of human specifics and their representation to be highly neurotic, but Mondrian needed it to create something larger, greater, and more joyous than anything bearing traces of human individuality.

Reading the letters in Holtzman's archive, we see that the way Mondrian achieved this triumph was by eliminating diversions and conflicts and focusing his inner power and deeply felt joy, which required, in some very essential way, his being on his own.[299] He was connected with *all* of humanity, with what is general and universal, but was never distressed by the worries that come with closer ties. And it was only on a couple of very rare occasions that he let any other human being occupy his time other than as a source of entertainment.

By no means must this be the only route to a certain level of achievement. Yet, even though there are exceptions—like Matisse, obsessed with his daughter Marguerite's health, or the very paternal Klee, who functioned almost as a single parent to his son Felix; or Vermeer, who cared deeply for his eleven children — for many creative geniuses, it has been fundamental to live on the sidelines of human interaction. Most of them, however—Picasso, Le Corbusier, or Kandinsky, for example—maintained at least the appearance of marriage, or they had close connections to lovers. Even if they were what could be called "ultimately selfish," they did not make their isolation as conspicuous as Mondrian did. Mondrian did not even put on a show of emotional proximity to anyone else. Even for the year he virtually lived with a younger man, there was never any parity; for all the support he received, and all he talked, he made no sacrifices.

The few months of living with Louis and Carel in 1897 was a rare moment in Mondrian's life of intersection with his brothers, a convenience out of necessity more than a choice based on affection. Six years later he would move back in with them, but that is only because he was at another low point, and had little choice. The ties were based on practicality, not emotion.

In a letter to Harry Holtzman in 1945, the year following Mondrian's death, Carel allows of Piet that he 'only heard about the announcement of

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[299] Harry Holtzman Papers. General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

his death by radio.'[300] He asks about his brother's final illness, saying he had no knowledge of it. But they were close enough, he assures Holtzman, so that he had been receiving letters via the Red Cross, as late as 1943. And these made no mention of any poor health, suggesting to Carel that the illness had been short.

Carel was correct about Mondrian's final malady, but if he had known his brother better he would have realized that Mondrian suffered from an unusal number of health problems and often had symptoms of flu and pneumonia. He had been plagued by them sufficiently to try strict diets and other cures. When he was well, he was robust, but he often had periods when he was too weak from fever and physical pain to paint.[301]

Carel has one overriding concern. He laments repeatedly that his brother left him nothing, and had given him nothing during his lifetime. Willem died shortly after Piet. Carel writes, 'I am his only brother who is still alive, and I do not possess a single memento from him. It would have been so nice to have something of his.' It appears that it is in hopes of rectifying that gap that Carel has emphasized their closeness.

Mondrian's youngest brother writes Holtzman, 'I guess that you entirely share his ideas about modern art without subject.' The statement suggests that Mondrian's turn to abstraction was beyond the grasp of this man whose life work had been as a government official. Then he pathetically asks, 'Did he ever mention me? Was there no letter for me which should have been forwarded?'

Having written to Holtzman in Dutch, he turns diffident, 'I take it for granted that you conversed with Piet, who is a Dutchman, in the Dutch language.' Carel informs his brother's legal executor that he could have written in English if he wanted to, but that for clarity he has used his native tongue. The implication is that anyone who does not speak Dutch could not possibly have been as close to Piet as Piet's own brother; Carel almost certainly knew that Holtzman in fact did not speak Dutch, and needed to have the letter translated, which was the case. Holtzman and Mondrian communicated in French, in which Mondrian had become totally conversant, as well as English. Carel's disingenuous tactic suggests that it should have been a family member, presumably him, who was Mondrian's heir and executor.

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[300] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, undated [probably early 1945], in: Holtzman Papers.

[301] For instance: 'ik had ook de griep en moest 14 daag thuis blijven dat is heel iets als men alleen is', letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, March 10 1925; 'De griep is nu eindelijk ook bij me vergeten en ik kan weer gewoon werken zonder die moeheid die ik eerst er na had', letter Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, 'Sunday' no date [1927/1928]; 'J'ai été très très malade depuis tu était chez moi. Je n'ai pas travaillé dans 3 mois', Mondrian to Seuphor, April 28 1935; 'Met mij gaat 't maar langzaam […] ik neem nu nog cachets, en doe zorgvuldig 't regime Dr. Hay.', letter Mondrian to Ella and Louk Hoyack, June 8 1935.

In conclusion, Carel describes two ten-day visits with his brother in Paris as 'unforgettable days. I was always the brother whom he loved most.'[302]

#

A few months earlier, Holtzman had received two letters written on behalf of Willem also putting in a bid for receiving paintings by Mondrian and making the claim of being the artist's favorite sibling. Willem's son was his father's spokesman, explaining that Willem himself was too ill to write.

It is likely that Willem the brother closest to him in age really was the family member with whom Piet had the strongest connection.[303] Even though Willem had left by the time Mondrian moved into the building where he had lived behind the Rijksmuseum, it was through his visits to Willem that he had come to know it. Although in their mature lives Willem never achieved anything close to the level of Piet, he, too, lived outside the family mold.

Initially Willem had trained to be a primary school teacher, the same profession Pieter Mondriaan had intended for Piet. But Willem, too, had an inclination to venture off course. At age seventeen, he had left the Netherlands for the West Indies to serve as private secretary to the Governor General. Following the brief period when he returned to the Netherlands—the time when he lived in Amsterdam, in that same building into which Piet moved, and subsequently in Utrecht—he had, at the end of 1895, moved to the Transvaal (part of the South African Republic) and started work for the South African Railway. Willem's interests were completely unrelated to Piet's, but he was similarly interested in breaking away from the family mold. He volunteered for the Transvaal Army and became a citizen there. Then he worked for the Transvaal Department of Education.[304]

In 1899, Willem was wounded in the Boer War and taken prisoner, after which he was interned on St. Helena. Although in June of 1902 he was repatriated to the Netherlands, by February of 1903 he had returned to the Transvaal. There, Willem became, in sequence, a banker, shopkeeper, teacher, politician, journalist, administrator of war relief, insurer, and painter of theater scenery. Piet may have been intrigued when, with this last job, his brother was trying his hand at art. But we imagine Piet mainly noticing Willem's chronic floundering. Piet would never be someone who felt a strong sense of family, who expected anything from the others and was therefore disappointed the way most people are about their relatives; nor

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[302] All quotes mentioned above come from the same letter: Carel Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, undated [probably early 1945], in: Holtzman Papers.

[303] Cf. Letter Albert van den Briel to Robert Welsh [no date], as quoted in Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 135: 'De broers van M[ondrian] zijn naar mijn mening onvolwaardigen, behalve de oudste, die […] naar Z. Afrika vertrokken is. Hij is ook de eenige waar M[ondrian] sijmpathie voor had.'

[304] Jan-Karel Bosch, *Willem Frederik Mondriaan: 'n biografiese skets*, Pretoria 2013. (http://rkddb.rkd.nl/rkddb/digital_book/201310959.pdf)

was he sentimental. With the communication to Harry Holtzman following Mondrian's death, we can develop a sense of what really mattered to the artist, we realize how exceptional he was in his life choices, which he, for reasons contrary to most people's expectations of normal human behavior, had made at a young age, and were central to his brilliance as independence as an artist.

The first missive written on Willem's behalf after Mondrian's death was sent to Harry Holtzman on August 21, 1944 from Pretoria in the Union of South Africa. Its author is J.F. (Jaco) Mondriaan, Willem's second son. Jaco first allows his own interest in his uncle's death and estate and then justifies it by explaining that he and his brother are the only people in their generation of the family, and that the family name will die if they have no male heirs. (In fact it was a large family, if one considers the descendants of Pieter Mondriaan's brothers and male cousins, with plenty of people so named, but Jaco was correct about the direct offspring of Pieter and Johanna if not about the last name.)

Like Carel, Willem was surprised to have inherited nothing from Piet. Jaco feels it is important for Holtzman, as executor, to realize that Piet had written Willem that he had 'made provision in his will for a few of his paintings and his personal effects' to go to him. Now, having seen Mondrian's will dated April 12, 1942, Willem's sons were baffled. 'We presume that perhaps he has explained to you personally his wishes as already promised to my dad.'[305] Jaco advises that, given the difficulty of wartime communication, Holtzman could communicate with the attaché to the South African Delegation in Ottawa to fulfill such wishes.

Holtzman did not reply until May 2, 1945, perhaps because of the exigencies of the war. J.F., again speaking for his father, wrote back to thank Holtzman for the care he showed Mondrian when he was ill. Jaco allows that, like Carel, they only heard about Mondrian's death because it was announced on the radio—on Vrye Oranje, one of the Dutch stations in South Africa. Then Jaco adds something remarkably similar to Carel's claim: 'The position is that my father and Piet were the only two brothers who felt alike regarding art and hence were very closely attached to one another. My father also did a little painting, but never to the high standard of his brother.'[306]

J.F. Mondriaan is transparent, although not by plan, in his devices to get Holtzman to give him and his brother and father some art. He allows that he and his brother have never seen any originals of Mondrian's work, only magazine articles. Holtzman, Jaco assures him, could rectify the problem. He repeats that they are the only ones to carry on the family name, the only

[305] Letter J.F. Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, August 21, 1944, in: Holtzman Papers.
[306] Letter J.F. Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, July 6, 1945, in: Holtzman Papers.

male heirs. 'You can therefore appreciate why we are so keen to have some of his work in our possession.' He now says that Mondrian had 'always promised' Willem that he and his brother—directly, not via their father—would, 'in the event of his death,' receive 'something of his work.'[307]

J.F. goes on to thank his uncle's heir for his offer of 'some of his earlier works' and also to praise him for his Mondrian exhibitions. He then suggests, 'Perhaps you again could think of us in your will!' (The exclamation point is his, as if he recognizes his own audacity even if he does not conceal it.) Jaco repeats the information that his close friend in the South African Legation in Ottawa could help in assuring safe transport of any art to be given, since, in the aftermath of the war, he believed that it 'was still not safe to trust valuables like that to ships.'

In November of 1949, J.F. Mondrian again wrote Holtzman, whom he now addressed as 'Harry.' The use of his first name must have been a South African informality rather than an indication of real closeness, for Jaco allows that they had not been in touch in nearly four years, and that he was still waiting for the two early works—which he alternately calls 'drawings' and 'paintings'—that Holtzman had promised for him and his brother. He suggests that it is now safe to send these by ship, and requests a copy of a new book on Mondrian by James Johnson Sweeney as well.[308] But what the nephew actually received is unknown.

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In spite of the period when he lived with Louis and Carel in Watergraafsmeer, Mondrian was not much more closely connected with his natal family once he moved from Winterswijk at age twenty than he was at the end of his life. The letters from his brother and nephew to his heir and executor—and his choice to write a will giving his entire estate to a younger American who was not a blood relative and whom he had met only a few years earlier—were consistent with decisions he had made at a much younger age. He was determined to keep relations with his brothers cordial and devoid of conflict, but little more. His adjudication when Johanna found Carel's wife's Catholicism intolerable was the only time when we know of his getting involved in family dynamics. On rare occasions, Carel would go to Mondrian in Paris, and he particularly enjoyed a visit with Carel and Carel's wife, and was cheerfully photographed with them, but the artist was never the one to do the traveling.[309] Mondrian felt himself essentially different from his siblings; more importantly, other people, related or not,

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[307] Letter J.F. Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, July 6, 1945, in: Holtzman Papers.

[308] Letter J.F. Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, November 1949, in: Holtzman Papers.

[309] In August 1936 Carel Mondriaan, together with his wife Mary, stayed a couple of days in Paris to visit his brother. A photograph of the three of them is taken in the studio at 278 Boulevard Raspail, see: Joop M. Joosten, *Piet Mondrian Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911-1944*, p. 164-165.

did not matter as much as his work. Ever. The individuals who would count for Mondrian would, unless we are convinced by a single tale that would emerge well after his death, only be those who helped him paint as he wanted. He was a truly singular individual, as unsentimental as he was determined about his cause in life.

In essays he would write after moving to Paris, Mondrian would address the subject of human relationships. Balance was the objective, a mixture of distance and cordiality the means of achieving it. He sought the same lively equilibrium in his personal existence as in artistic compositions. No element was to intrude on any other. People existed contained on their own within a fixed structure, albeit a lively and animated one. Mondrian's means of maintaining an undisturbed state of grace was by avoiding closeness. To eliminate the tensions and disagreements that are inevitable with deep attachments to other people, and so as not to spend emotional energy and waste time he would rather devote to an art intended for *all* people and for *all* of time, he elected to be neither a spouse nor a parent. It was a deliberate decision. Following one tentative gesture in that direction when he had just turned forty, shortly before he moved away from the Netherlands, he had made up his mind never again to violate his solitude.

Nothing was worth the disruptions to his purpose of making art. In this he was like a monk or nun for whom avoiding marriage or children was not a sacrifice but a luxury. His isolation empowered him.

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By the time Mondrian was in his late twenties, the nineteenth century drawing to its end, he had established the ground work of his life even if he had not yet put all the pieces together. What was more remarkable about the sibling relationships than the emotional distance was the lack of rivalry. The absence of visible love life was more unusual in a man his age; he had liaisons, but they were diversions, not points of focus. His life had a purpose that dominated all others, which was to make art.

IX

The Academy behind him, the book commission complete, Mondrian as a young artist trying to survive in Amsterdam developed certain patterns that would remain fixed for the rest of his life. A mix of reticence and passion, he was a chronic concealor of his personal emotions. Whether the feelings he hid were about himself or other people, he did not reveal them to others—and may not have known he had them. Meanwhile, he drew and painted with reverberating heart and spirit.

As he settled into his attic on the Ringdijk in Watersgraafmeer, he was consumed by the urge to celebrate beauty by making paintings. He was certain, as he had been when he was allowed to transform the family's playroom in Winterswijk into his own studio, and studied with Braet von

Überfeldt, and then slogged through the three years at the Academy, never a shining star, having to work during the days to finish at night in his last year with desultory results, that the making of art would be his life. He had not yet determined the method, or figured out the practicalities, but the desire was unquestionable. Mondrian was content to live counter to other people's expectations, just as he was not troubled by his mediocre grades or bothered that his style of painting quickly diverged from The Hague School norm. He had no qualms.

#

To understand Mondrian as he was forming himself in his twenties—transitioning from being an unusual and reclusive but utterly determined child in an arch Calvinist household and then an art student in a large city where he was equally detached from others—followed by an immersion in fire-and-brimstone torture-on-the-rack religious extremism in those illustrations for *Christ's Heirs* that somehow get overlooked or set aside by all the many people who have examined him and his work—to the artist who would give himself over, totally and with rare equanimity, to developing forms of painting in ceaseless progress that depended not on repeating himself but always taking the next step forward, while living outside the social orbit, apart from groups or movements even as they idolized him—it helps to take a look at the small, select group of individuals with whom he belongs. They have existed throughout human history. These devotees of art above all else are like solitudinous religious figures, but whether they are more like Buddhist monks or Catholic priests does not matter, because the specific belief system or the position in the hierarchy matters less than the intensity of devotion and priority of art as their guiding lights.

These rare people have flourished in a range of civilizations, from ancient China to 16th century India to 18th century St. Petersburg to the 19th century American wilds to modern Africa. They have isolated themselves from the normal pulls of everyday life and devoted themselves to their purpose with utter zeal and contentment. And they have left human civilization some of its greatest treasures. Mondrian was unlike anyone else, ever, but he belonged to an exceptional general type. They form a tiny elite that has occupied its hermetic cells in pinpoints on the globe for all of time.

To some of us, these rare individuals who have made artistic creation the sole focus of their lives are hero figures. Their devotion to an exceptional pursuit, and their indifference to standard values, make most people consider them wierdos, but to a few of us they are exemplars of courage, all the more admirable when, like Mondrian, they achieve something that enriches the world.

The general type is beautifully characterized in English novels from the mid-twentieth century—superb books by Somerset Maugham and Margaret Kennedy, for example—where a large part of their role is the impact they

have on the people who know them personally.[310] In those books, the cohorts of these serious painters who live alone in their studios are generally well-heeled bourgeoisie at the more cultured end of their social spectrum. These kindly intentioned supporters respect artists and musicians, although of course they would never expect someone in their same echelon of society, or one of their own children, to join the Bohemian ranks. The support system is essential to the artists, even as they live differently from its constituents.

Mondrian was one of those artists who lived on his own and outside the norm, and depended entirely for his entire life on the financial aid and patronage and encouragement of more mainstream people, but he was exceptional both because of his extraordinary genius and emotional distance from his support
system. He would not charm or cajole. He lived in his solitary way, personally isolated, not because of how it positioned him, but because it was inevitable. He could not ever fully connect to other individuals, ever. Not a single one.

His exceptional life choices would prove of immense benefit to humanity. His brothers and their families never understood them, from the time he was young until after his death, but the rest of the world reaped the rewards. There were women and men who fell in love with him, and many associates and friends who admired him, but no one ever really got near, yet the quid-pro-quo of that insularity is the art that enhances the lives of millions of human beings, and always will.

X

In 1986, Harry Holtzman would write 'Piet Mondrian was the sanest human being I have ever known.'[311] Holtzman believed that this supreme mental health was manifest in Mondrian's approach both to the making of his art and its acceptance, his modest needs, and in the conduct of his personal relationships. To Holtzman, Mondrian led—in spite of the perpetual financial difficulties, frequent bouts of influenza, recurring pneumonia, and other tough realities—'a most luxurious life. He enjoyed the luxury of continuous productive development, the consistent unity of his philosophical values with the way he actually lived, worked, and related to others and the world.'[312]

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[310] William Somerset Maugam, *The Moon and Sixpence*, 1919; Margaret Kennedy, *The Constant Nymph,* 1924.
[311] Harry Holtzman, 'Piet Mondrian: the Man and His Work' in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 9.
[312] Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 9.

The arrival at a state of being that has been the ideal of philosophers since ancient times, and the true "integration" that is the goal of psychotherapy and its offshoots that have dominated western civilization in the current epoch, is of stunning importance. It is the dream that eludes most people.

In Amsterdam in the late 1890s, moving from place to place, he had not yet crystallized the painterly vision or the manner of living that would result in his best art and would give him the calm and wholeness appearance which Holtzman found so remarkable. He was still trying various paths; it would be a long time, in fact, more than for most people, before he acquired his most authoritative voice and developed into his mature self. But he was already establishing the distance and apartness, and had the purposefulness, that would be fundamental to his success. But the act of looking, and the craft of painting, already cast a spell of enchantment over everything else in his life.

#

In 1917, Mondrian would write an essay called *The New Plastic in Painting.*[313] We jump ahead to it because there Mondrian discusses what was going on in his head in this period some twenty years earlier when he was moving from location to location in Amsterdam and trying different approaches to painting. He explains that to achieve his goals as an artist, he consciously determined that he had to cast aside aspects of his emotional life. He would not be victimized by his own psyche; at least, that was his intention.

By the time he wrote the essay, he believed he had transcended the inevitable lows and highs caused by personal feelings and developed a form of spirituality that he could express in his art. Instead of being rendered unhealthy by troublesome personal issues, or engaged in the fallacy that they could be resolved, Mondrian had entered a realm where they had no significance.

While the discomfiting elements of the human psyche, and their deliberate presentation, have been the lifeblood of much modern art, Mondrian would have none of it. Surrealism and expressionism were antitherical to his beliefs; so was art that results from and inspires intellectual analysis. Whether Mondrian's decisions were a matter of unconscious repression, or of self-organization achieved with full awareness of his feelings, is for us to consider. Regardless, Mondrian deliberately eliminated private concerns from his work, and, instead painted impersonal compositions of universal appeal, salubrious to everyone.

Mondrian's writing in *The New Plastic in Painting* is often obtuse, and he rambles on repetitively for pages, yet even though his verbal language lacks the concision and discipline of his painting, it illuminates Mondrian's will to

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[313] Piet Mondrian, *De Nieuwe Beelding in de schilderkunst* was published in twelve installments in the first year of *De Stijl*, October 1917 – October 1918. A supplement followed in the December 1918 edition.

partition or shed sides of himself that troubled him. The Italics are his: 'Because equilibrium between nature and spirit can be realized in abstract-real life, it can be the phase in which man will become *himself*. He will be *equilibrated and completely human* both in his own duality and in relation to the life around him.'[314]

Fortunately, at this point he inserts a footnote. In it, in fine print, he makes a statement that is fundamental to our understanding of what he means. He describes the developments that were in an insipient stage in those years after he had left his parents' house for the way-station provided by the Wormsers and then fluctuated between complete independence and the reliance on family still at play when he lived with Louis and Carel. In the footnote, Mondrian writes, 'Only by becoming equilibrated can man appreciate or create pure art. Being not altogether natural, he is not dominated by nature; he does not desire or express the appearance of nature. Being not altogether spiritual, he remains in equilibrium with nature, but he nevertheless desires or creates art.'[315]

Eventually he would fulfil his desire to be 'not altogether natural' or 'dominated by nature.' But as long as he lived with family members—and, a few years later, when he seemed on the brink of marriage, although not whole-heartedly, since he broke off a wedding engagement precipitously, explained his reversal to no one, and moved off to Paris—he was still in a dangerously 'natural' state, and was therefore dominated by forces antithetical to artistic creation. In the 1917 essay, Mondrian goes even further in expressing why he had needed to live on his own to take potential pain, any interruptions to the creating of art, out of his life. He writes of 'the new life' in which a person 'perceives and experiences life *abstractly* and is therefore not bound by its limitations.'[316]

In 1917, when he wrote this essay which conceptualizes such a super-human person, Mondrian was back in the Netherlands following an initial move to Paris. War was raging throughout Europe; it was a dire time period. For the past three years, he had been unable to return to the place he had made his new home. In spite of the tumult, he had developed a firm and absolute sense of a way of life that transcended life's vicissitudes. The following paragraph encapsulates not only his ideal but, extraordinarily, what he would succeed in achieving in his persona—although possibly not in his inner self:

'Abstract-real life is the life of *truly modern man* … through which the new mentality is expressed. Truly modern man *consciously experiences* the deeper

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[314] Piet Mondrian, *The New Plastic in Painting (1917)*, in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 57.
[315] Piet Mondrian, *The New Plastic in Painting (1917)*, in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 57.
[316] Piet Mondrian, *The New Plastic in Painting (1917)*, in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 57-58.

meaning of individuality: he is the *mature individual*. Because he sees the individual-as-universal, he combats the individual-as-individual. Triumphant over outward individuality, he is *this* thus *the independent individual: the conscious self*.'[317]

That is the crux of it: the wish to overcome 'the individual-as-individual' in order to become a higher sort of being. And this is what Mondrian was still working towards as the 19th century drew to an end and he was betwixt and between, both in how he lived and how he painted, in Amsterdam.

XI

Within the rare species of human beings we might call "dedicated artists," and, within them, the strata of "geniuses," Mondrian would belong to the tiny sub-category that depended on abstraction as both the source and the goal of personal balance. Finding his way in Amsterdam, even once he had started to live alone, he was still a figurative artist, and his real independence and happiness as a person would only come when he developed an art where the qualities of human comportment that would make him serene—the mix of balance and equilibrium in everyday conduct, dependent on isolation; the disconnect from "nature" in life—existed also in what he painted.

#

In 1934, again a time when discord was sweeping over the world, Mondrian would, in another essay, argue for the inextricable links between life decisions and the art one makes.[318] Here he would attribute his own development and his ability to make his art as a result of his deliberately curtailing the impact of his natal family on his existence. He writes in the third person and appears to be generalizing, but what he says applies to his having severed himself from his parents and siblings as soon as he could: 'From antiquity to the present, art shows us that we are moving toward a life that is open, clear, free, even though we are still surrounded by the life of the past, where everything is confused, where parts dominate, where everything is mixed: good and evil, benevolence and malevolence, love and hate—where all is only a seeming unity.'[319]

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[317] Piet Mondrian, *The New Plastic in Painting (1917)*, in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 58.

[318] *La Vraie Valeur des oppositions dans la vie et dans l'art*, dated December 1934 on a French manuscript, was most likely intended for *Axis: A Quarterly Review of Contemporary "Abstract" Painting and Sculpture* (London, 1935-37), edited by Myfanwy Evans; it never appeared there. An English version of *The True Value of Oppositions* in Mondrian's estate is almost certainly translated by Winifred Nicholson. See: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 283.

[319] Piet Mondrian, *The True Value of Oppositions in Life and Art (1934)*, in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 285.

The family where the children followed their father like ducks in a line was, indeed, 'only a seeming unity.' To achieve what was 'open, clean, free,' he needed to relegate his family to a position of minor importance. And he needed to free himself completely from the dominance of the rigid, confrontational religiosity and arch conservative politics that were at the core of his parents' existence.

Mondrian's solution was not to avoid human relations and their vagaries, but to regulate them. He did not create a schism from his family; he simply positioned them where he wanted them in his orbit. This is why an understanding of his personal relationships is so essential to a grasp of his art. It *all* has to do with control, balance, and positioning.

His art does not try to avoid humaneness. Rather, it accommodates it in generalized form as an essential part of life to be managed properly as well as celebrated. Conflict and overt difficulty should no more be allowed to enter into one's relationships with family members than a messy drip of paint should be permitted on a canvas.

Other of the great twentieth-century geometric abstractionists, among them many "constructionists" and "minimalists," Kazimir Malevich and Anni Albers among them, made art that has a conscious emptiness, that by program presents an alternative to the complexity that comes with family relations, sexual desire, guilt, love, and other uncontrollable forces. Mondrian, on the contrary, included connectedness in his work. He was too aware to think that the role of one's parents and siblings, and one's subsequent relationships, was unimportant; he was simply determined to position people and his relationships to them, and to establish boundaries. It was a balancing act. The goal was to eliminate completely, in his life and his paintings, anything that might be remotely disturbing, and to achieve a certain perfection.

In 1941, Mondrian made some notes in preparation for an interview with Charmion von Wiegand, a painter and writer who had become a personal friend. He asserts that 'Every art must be the expression of our whole being and can be approached only with our whole being. But the kind of expression depends on the grade of profoundness that sensuality has. This fact explains the culture of art toward pure abstraction. For true abstraction is not rejection or the elimination of parts of the whole of reality, but the intensification of it. […] An abstract work is not the creation of another reality but another vision of one and always the same reality. This fact makes the work living and concrete. Through the rectangular opposition of straight lines, he [Mondrian is writing about himself in the third person here] expressed the completely balanced reciprocal action of the opposite forces of life manifested in the reality around us.'[320]

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[320] Piet Mondrian, Notes for an Interview, [ca. 1941], in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings,* p. 336-337.

Thus he accepted, and even celebrated, the oppositions inherent in life—within one's self, among members of a family—and made them fundamental to his art. Rather than bury what was human, he grasped and articulated it, and at the same time took the poison out. This may explain in part why those paintings move us so deeply. On some level the viewer feels, without question, that he is facing major truths of life as a hallelujah rather than a source of questioning and discomfort.

In his twenties, moving to one location after another in Amsterdam, doing whatever he could to make a go of it as a painter, Mondrian was like many other people at that junction of their lives, trying to sort out the issues of profession, money, the relation to his natal family, religion, politics, the possibility of marriage and children. But he was working his way toward this exceptional set of conclusions. His wish to determine his life plan was standard fare; the plan was not.

He would make geometry his emotional and physical home. The marvel of the right angle, that splendid relationship of vertical and horizontal, would offer a perfection and order and stasis that quotidian existence lacked. He was not yet there in the late 1890s, but he was assuredly pointed in that direction.

#

In 1951, Carel Mondriaan wrote Harry Holtzman a heartbreaking letter. While to people researching Mondrian Carel by then presented himself as the authority on his older brother's life, a role that came easily to him as the preferred sibling, to the executor of Mondrian's estate he was desperate. By then Carel had apparently received three early works by Piet, gifts from Holtzman. But he had lent them to a friend who was an official portraitist for the Roman Catholic Church. His friend had, in turn, sold them and squandered the funds. Carel was all the more outraged that the culprit used the money to buy clothing as well as suitcases, and for partying. 'Of course we prosecuted him,'[321] Carel tells Holtzman. The man went to prison, with an agreement that any money he earned once he was out on parole would go to Carel. But Carel had little hope of ever seeing a single guilder.

Carel now made a claim beyond anything he put in the letters he had written Holtzman immediately following Mondrian's death. He stated that his brother had told him that he and Van den Briel would be his heirs, with Van den Briel having the first choice of paintings. There had been, he said, no communication since the one when Piet told him that and the radio broadcast in which Carel learned both about Piet's death and Harry Holtzman's appointment as heir. Carel continued, 'As news has reached me that you, Mr Holtzman, are in possession of several works of Piet's, I humbly request you to help me get over the loss by parting with some pieces in your collection […] just one canvas of Piet's from his last period would

[321] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, July 16 1951, in: Holtzman Papers.

make me very grateful to you, and would show me that you do still have some understanding of the irresponsibly mean action of that church-painter.'[322]

We do not know what happened subsequently.

XII

A new model of bicycle had been developed in the 1880s. As opposed to the old velocipede, it had two wheels of the same size, and a chain that synchronized them. An efficient, inexpensive, enjoyable means of getting around, it transformed the way people lived. It became vital to Mondrian in his existence in his small studio-home on the Leidseplein. In 1896, the first automobile appeared. It went nearly sixteen miles per hour, and offered great promise. But it was only for very rich people, and had no bearing on the life of a struggling young artist like Mondrian except as an exciting object to observe. The sole other form of transport in the city were horse trams; electric trams would not come into use until 1900.

For now, a bike was the speediest method of getting places, and one did not have to adhere to a schedule to use it. Living in the city center again, while wanting to make regular outings to the rural outskirts of Amsterdam where he could find subject matter closer to what he knew from Winterswijk, Mondrian decided to buy such a bike. He found an old used one. It was a major step; he had never before spent that much money on anything, and the expense, even though he kept it as low as possible, was daunting.[323]

Mondrian was not yet an urbanite or an abstractionist. All the values he would subsequently find in those domains, and only in those domains, he now sought in the natural world. Mondrian used his new two-wheeled transport for daily excursions southeast, along the Amstel River, to the Gein, a quiet, narrow river that ran between the village of Abcoude and the small city of Weesp. It was a trek on a bike in the era before changing gears and thin tires, but he was content to hang his art supplies from the handlebars and head off to a bucolic setting.

There he painted a number of small canvases of the scenery alongside the river with its tall trees, occasional farmhouse, and mills. Enchanted by color and light, competent with brush and paint, and gifted at composition, he endowed these scenes with a quiet poetry. But Mondrian had not yet developed an original vision or found his inner flame, and the paintings he produced one after another lack bravura. They have their charm, though, for the young artist already had the instinct to celebrate the earth's bounty.

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[322] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Harry Holtzman, July 16 1951, in: Holtzman Papers.

[323] De Baar, *Een stad in beweging*, p. 15.

His friend Michel Seuphor, more accurate about Mondrian's artistry than his persona, observes, of these paintings of the Gein: 'Certain subjects in the countryside nearby seemed inexhaustible to him, and he returned to these countless times with an ever renewed and ever powerful interest. He behaved as if he hoped to wrest from the object, through patient exploration, some secret substance, an intimation of the absolute, which he sensed in all things, and especially in the humblest, the most common.'[324]

Ordinary sights were miracles to him; this was why he had begun to structure his life to make the evocation of visible beauty his exclusive goal. Painting mundane subjects like irrigation ditches, Mondrian evoked the glory of sunlight in simple puddles of water. He feasted on the lush darkness along the banks of modest trenches, the growth of even the most humdrum species of trees, and the sky at any location whatsoever, and he rendered these everyday sights as splendors. Working and reworking the same themes, he strived to present the essence of everything he saw and organize it in compositions with a life of their own. He encapsulated the truth of each subject and, with a delicate touch, arranged the whole in small canvases where the individual elements interacted in a graceful dance.

Here, Seuphor is his most trenchant. He sees the paintings Mondrian made in his mid-twenties on those bicycle trips to the Gein as part of the same search in which the artist was engaged decades later on the rue du Départ. River beds and thick foliage would be replaced by abstract compositions in which most of the surface is sparkling white, and modulated brushwork of mixed pigment by flat black lines and rectangles of pure primary color, but the goal was the same. 'Much later, he discovered that this secret, this divine absolute, lies in us, and that it is we ourselves who for the most part project it into things. He would then be led to discard progressively the natural aspect of things, and strive to paint the divine in itself, the absolute as such, even as he found it within him, without reference to any external object.'[325] Painting modest vignettes in the industrial neighborhoods he chose as his subjects in the rural outskirts of Amsterdam, Mondrian was focused on the timeless, universal forces that would be his lifelong obsession.

XIII

While he was producing a lot of paintings, Mondrian did nothing to try to sell them. He was struggling to make ends meet, and he was restless. Having tried but failed to get to England the previous year, at the start of May, 1898,

[324] Seuphor, *Mondrian,* p. 48-51.
[325] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 51.

he tried for a Prix de Rome.[326] The award, funded by the Dutch government, gave its recipients four years of study abroad.

Allebé was one of the five jurors. His former advisor was his ally, and, as director of the Academy, had great sway. Mondrian was optimistic that he would be given the chance to take off for four years in the ancient city where Michelangelo and Raphael had flourished. Another juror determining who would receive the prize was the seventy-four-year-old painter Jozef Israëls, one of the doyens of The Hague School; presumably, he, like Allebé, would respect Mondrian's burgeoning skill. During the ten-hour examination period, Mondrian's knowledge of art history was 'satisfactory,' meaning that he was considered sufficiently well versed in architecture, painting, sculpture, and perspective to qualify. [327] The next step in the process was to do a figure drawing of a naked male model.

The results proved disastrous. The jurors rated Mondrian's knowledge of human anatomy as grossly insufficient. Perhaps his discomfort with the subject is what rendered him incompetent, but, whatever the cause, he could not sketch a nude man adequately. His outright rejection on May 27 was a blow to his self-confidence.[328]

The shaken twenty-seven-year-old quickly retreated to the homefold. Even if he was ambivalent about the rest of the family, he was ready for the benefits of summer in Winterswijk and for the creature comforts of the household run by his mother. Besides, he could again paint the scenery on which he had worked with Uncle Frits. Mondrian took his bicycle with him on the train trip with its three changes en route, so that on warm sunny days, he could pedal to the surrounding farmland, and even over the German border. He made these outings with his brothers. Piet and Willem and Louis and Carel would regularly take off in the good country air, cycling substantial distances in the flat countryside. They would stop to drink the thick dark beer for which the region was famous and scarf down the local porridge made with buttermilk and coarse bread.[329] This robust way of life, fortified him, and put the sting of the Prix de Rome defeat behind him. The rare interlufe of camaderie with his three brothers was a boost, although Mondrian would never repeat it.

Mondrian improved spirits infused his painting. His work had increased vitality and punch, and his flare for space and light and rhythm set his new scenes of the Winterswijk region apart from what other artists were doing

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[326] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119.
[327] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119.
[328] Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 259: 'Zijn inschrijving in dat jaar voor de Prix de Rome […] werd een faliekante mislukking. Daarna keerde hij voor langere tijd naar Winterswijk terug, en solliciteerde hij zelfs naar een baan als tekenleraar in het naburige Enschede. Het zegt iets over het matige zelfvertrouwen van de […] jonge kunstenaar.'
[329] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, January 20, 1946, in: RKD #0150 inv. nr. 133.

of similar subjects. While Frits Mondriaan, who was there as usual that summer, made work that was technically competent, the uncle's more traditional pictures of cows, farm women at work, and other aspects of local life, lacked the joy and force of what his nephew was doing. The drawings and watercolors Piet painted at the same time of the same subjects have more authority and greater zip.

Fig. 9. Mondrian, *St. Jacob's Church with Small Tree*, 1897-98

Mondrian pumped each painting he made that summer with perpetual motion. He was developing a new knack to use bold verticals, diagonals, and horizontals to create a strong rhythm. In a drawing he made of the Jakobskirche in 1898 (Fig. 9), he stroked the side of the crayon on the laid paper to induce a range of tones and impart a pulsing energy. [330] The technique resembles Seurat's. Mondrian could have seen the French artist's work in reproduction; on the other hand, he may have stumbled on the method just through his own experimentation. Whatever the source, the vigorous movement of the side of the crayon, like the flow of an orchestra conductor's baton, causes a tree to burst to life in front of our eyes under a blazing celestial sunlight.

[330] A58 St. *Jacob's Church with Small Tree*, Winter 1897-1898, Charcoal and crayon on paper, 21 x 12 cm, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag.

XIV

Mondrian had wanted the Prix de Rome not only so he could work with a stipend in Italy. It was to be his salvation, a rescue from the financial nightmare where he saw no way to keep supporting himself. He was too prudent to get into debt, but he was completely out of funds when the rejection came, and his efforts to paint something saleable while living free of expenses back under his parents' roof had led to naught. Determined to leave Winterswijk at the end of summer, he reduced the price of a painting he had at the Kunstliefde show.[331] Apparently his depiction of rainy weather was not the sort of thing the Dutch bourgeoisie wanted in their living rooms, even at a bargain.

From Winterswijk, he wrote the mayor's office in Amsterdam to request a 'Certificate of Good Behavior' from October of 1897 until August 6, 1898 so that he could apply for a position as a drawing instructor in Enschede, in Overijssel province. The document arrived on August 12, giving him a fair chance of landing the job.[332]

He abandoned the idea as soon as it might become reality.

Mondrian was frittering on every level. He had no meaningful social life; the only constant was his wish to paint. Yet even with his art, he was unable to stay on course. He alternated between painting the local scenery in Winterswijk in his own style and returning to Amsterdam for short stints to do copies of seventeenth-century paintings at the Rijksmuseum. These were his only means of making money. For each picture, he needed to make a formal request and receive written permission; those documents tell us that in July and August, he worked on a copy of *The Spinning Woman* (1652-1662) by Nicolaes Maes, and at the end of August he was accorded the rights to set up his easel in front of *Cage with Parrot* (ca. 1660 – 1670) by Jan Steen, which he painstakingly copied over the next couple of months.[333] He periodically retreated to his parents' home to escape Amsterdam's summer heat and paint outside in the good country air, but mostly he worked on his slavish renditions of the masters to make himself solvent. He earned what he needed to return to Amsterdam full-time at the start of autumn.

But even in the city, Mondrian mainly wanted to paint country scenes. He was not satisfied to do so from memory. He began to make regular outings to Het Gooi, a pretty agricultural area not far from the city, at the southern edge of the large lake called "IJsselmeer," formerly Zuiderzee. To

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[331] UA5 *Natte Dag* was first shown at St Lucas autumn 1897 and listed for Dfl.200,-. The next year, Mondrian submitted this same painting to the Kunstliefde show but listed it for Dfl.100,-, Joop M. Joosten and Robert P. Welsh, *III Appendix of the Catalogue Raisonné*, V + K Publishing, Blaricum; Inmerc, Paris: Cercle d'Art, 1998, p. 22.

[332] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119.

[333] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 119-120.

get to this region that had long been popular with painters and writers, Mondrian would take a steam-powered tram from Weesperplein station to the town of Laren. Then he would wander on foot, or, on the days when he had carried his bicycle on the train, would travel further afield. One particular compound of farm buildings had a meeting of rooflines that captivated him. But sometimes he welcomed the most ordinary subjects, like the sandy and uneven terrain, as a challenge to his painterly skills. It was difficult to capture, but Mondrian mastered the task and articulated the undulating surface in a series of agreeable pictures.

When Mondrian did not travel out to Het Gooi, he painted in the residential part of Amsterdam called the Schinkelbuurt. The hefty cows and ancient trees of its farms, the bridges that crossed the canals and the barges that floated down them, and the windmills providing energy to the region made excellent subject matter. But Mondrian was captivated even by subjects that to a less appreciative viewer would have had no allure; he did not require the picturesque. He valued everything his eye took in. With animated brushwork and a light touch, he made humdrum sights like ship works and irrigation ditches luminous and engaging. The Royal Wax Candle factory, a bleak industrial structure, became lyrical through his appreciative eyes and skillful hand.[334] Mondrian recognized the miracle of daylight hitting every sort of surface. Reflections in water fascinated him, and he rendered them in all their glory. The sky was his elixir. In an understated style, he evoked its splendor.

He had a knack for construction, and in all his paintings of this period, Mondrian used color both to establish position and embolden the strong, colorful forms he carefully worked against one another. Mondrian's canvases in theory resembled a lot of what other people were doing in this culture where painting was both a respected profession and a proven source of commerce, but even if superficially they belonged to the mainstream in their execution and apparent respect for industriousness in human endeavor, they were distinctive. Above all, Mondrian's art both captured, and created, light. And the light that animates these small paintings of ordinary life was, as light itself is, magnificent.

Yes, these canvases belong, more than Mondrian's later art, with its inventiveness that changed the world, to a time and place. They embody a norm, but they are possessed with its nobility.

XV

Not everything Mondrian did in these first years on his own in Amsterdam has the same force. He made several portraits of young girls that are sentimental to the point of being saccharine. They have a quality of shilly-

[334] A189 – A190 – A191.

shallying, the weakness of someone who is off course without yet being certain of where, or who, he wants to be. While pleasing, perhaps, to large numbers of people, to some of us they are truly irritating—for we know what Mondrian could do at his best. Even with his best work of the time, if Mondrian had been struck down dead at the same age as Géricault, he would never have been considered a master, or changed the world.[335] In spite of his real achievement in the paintings of Het Gooi, and Schinkelbuurt, he did not yet have the consistent force and the consuming willpower that mark genius.

In this time when he was developing—and, in the course of trying to move forward, taking some steps backwards—Mondrian did, however, find more of his own voice when he started painting still lifes. He could arrange as many as a dozen apples exactly rendering their various sizes and positions, and render the sheen of decorative porcelain plates exquisitely. The light bounces off of that shiny pottery in perfect contrast to its absorbtion on an apple skin. He also made remarkable drawings, watercolors, and oils of chrysanthemums, sometimes single, sometimes grouped. Each flower has a quality of redolent concentration, its own and that of the painter rendering it.

When he undertook more of his obligatory portrait commissions, he was less impressive. Today we would not look twice at some of Mondrian's paintings of Calvinist bourgeoisie—or the listless, tepid nudes—if we did not know who did them. On occasion, however, he drew people he knew in the act of performing music, and there he summoned his inner force and made the work alive. When inspired, Mondrian was full of feeling and rose easily above the ranks of a minor, if adequate, artistic practitioner.

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In September of 1898, he showed the painting *Shipworks* in an Arti et Amicitiae exhibition in honor of the coronation of Queen Wilhelmina.[336] It was an important show, one that would be seen by more than the usual number of viewers. The painting Mondrian selected to represent himself before the public was among his most prosaic. The rendering of a couple of dinghies on the bank of a waterway and of some low buildings with high-pitched roofs is competent, and the water shimmers thanks to the judicious use of white in the brushwork, but this small canvas, approximately twelve by fourteen and a half inches, lacks flare or imagination. Sometimes the young Mondrian let himself soar, but then he retreated in moments where he seemed afraid of something. He did not know how, simultaneously, to conform to the requisites for success and be himself at the same time. His paintings of farm buildings and country lanes and windmills had particular charm and originality, but *Shipworks,* his choice

[335] Théodore Géricault (1791-1824), despite his early death, exerted a seminal influence on the development of Romantic art in France.

[336] A177 Scheepstimmerwerf (Shipworks), 1898, Oil on canvas, 31 x 37 cm.

to garner success in an official setting, was a crisis. When Mondrian played it safe, he failed utterly. By sticking to a subject that reflected the prosperity of the times, by painting it in a manner that would not raise the hackles of the academicians, and hoping to make a much needed sale, he not only concealed his own strength; he betrayed his inventiveness.

The canvas attracted a provocative commentary in the *Arnhemsche Courant*. 'Without risking unusual color effects or affectedness in the draughtsmanship, there rests in this painting a tone of careful but straightforward observation which holds him back from a more exuberant realism as manifested, for example, in Breitner; the Golden Way, which leads so many painters into a morass of banality, has been trodden by Mondrian with success.'[337] George Hendrik Breitner, born in 1857, was an artist who painted the same sort of subject with a bit more dash, but whose canvases were highly complicated, almost illegible in the rendering of boats and local buildings. Mondrian has clarified and simplified the scene in a way that makes the viewer's experience calmer and less taxing than it would have been in front of a Breitner. The older painter, a leader of the "Amsterdam" or "brown" school, painted the city of Amsterdam, shipyards, construction sides and similar subject matters, in which he showed the social and cultural changes; even if Mondrian was deliberately showing a vignette of one of the Netherlands's thriving new businesses, he makes it look like a rural fishing village.[338] The painter who the *Courant*'s critic describes as 'exuberant' was, by plan, presenting modernity with an energy and abandon in keeping with the subject matter; Mondrian, the future modernist, was exercising misguided restraint when he might have let loose. The critic's observation is utterly intriguing. For while my inclination is to see *Shipworks* as an unfortunate lapse into quaintness, the unnamed writer for the *Courant*, in commending Mondrian for the classicism of his work, and for his clear composition and sense of order, was, I now see, more astute than I was in my notion of the painting as conformist. The vital trait of *Shipworks,* as the critic recognized, was not a matter of timidity or subservience. The painting was, rather, part of Mondrian's perpetual effort to keep his life on an even keel and to adhere to definite strictures in his art.

Mondrian's utterly originality, at this moment of his life, terrified him. He was determined to stick to certain rules to hold his life in balance. It was not simply that he needed the money or wanted to succeed in his milieu; self-discipline, and deft technique, were essential to his sanity. Order, and the ability to regulate himself, were pre-requisites to his ability to express what he felt in the depths of his heart. It is the same insistence on training, military style, George Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein made central to the

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[337] *Arnhemsche Courant*, September 9, 1898, as quoted in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 226.
[338] See for Breitner's Amsterdam scenes: J.F. Heijbroek and Erik Schmitz, *George Hendrik Breitner in Amsterdam*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Amsterdam 2014.

brilliant artistic adventure that became the New York City Ballet.[339] Emotion and feeling can only come through on a base of rules and skill. This knowledge was central to Mondrian's being.

XVI

A total lack of money loomed. Mondrian had neither resources nor illusions. He spent money minimally, but urgently needed a new means to earn some. Trying but failing to sell more than the occasional painting of local scenery, he began to seek commissions from the Calvinist community.

At the end of 1898, he got a break. The dentist Adriaan Biersteker—father of the little girl who had been the subject of his first portrait—proposed to the Consistory of the large English Reformed Church, in the Begijnhof part of Amsterdam, near the city center, that they have Mondrian design, for the pulpit, wood panels in honor of the Queen's coronation the previous month.[340] On September 6, 1898, Wilhelmina, having turned eighteen a week before, had been crowned with profuse official ceremony, and since royalty was a link between the Dutch people and their Christian God, it was vital to honor the new Queen wherever people worshipped.

The church building dated to the end of the fourteenth century. Since 1607, it had served congregants from the Church of Scotland and the Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk, both bastions of Calvinist values. The scenes Mondrian drew to be carved on the sides of the new altar represented the relationship of Dutch Calvinism to the House of Orange. The sculptor who executed them in oak was Lambertus F. Edema van der Tuuk, and although neither the preliminary sketches nor the final drawings have survived, the shallow wooden reliefs still grace the altar today.

Mondrian performed his assigned task with the necessary diligence, but also managed to put his own slant on matters of church and state. In the first panel, a rigid female figure represents the Netherlands. In her left hand, which indicates her authority and military power, she holds a sword. With her right hand, she shakes the right hand of a second woman, equally erect and stiff. This awkward character symbolizes the church, indicated by the book she holds in her left hand. The personification of the state shows her own hair, elaborately coiffed, while the stand-in for the church wears a head scarf that falls in pleats to the hem of the dress. Mondrian's representation of the two entities makes their contrast pronounced. The worldliness of the state is clear in the vanity of that hair-do, and its steely control is manifest

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[339] Cf. Nicholas Fox Weber, *Patron Saints. Five Rebels Who Openend America to a New Art 1928-1943*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1992, p. 177-212.

[340] See: H.L.C. Jaffé, 'Een preekstoel naar ontwerp van Mondriaan', in: H.L.C. Jaffé, *Over utopie en werkelijkheid in de beeldende kunst. Verzamelde opstellen van H.L.C. Jaffé (1915-1984)*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1986, p. 67.

with the sword. The other-worldliness of the church, and the rejection of the flesh, are announced in the concealment of all that is natural under layers of drapery, and the yearning for spiritual knowledge is manifest with the book.

At age twenty-six, Mondrian was constantly weighing those differences. All around him, he saw the world of materialism and vanity. The milieu of religious fervor and personal denial in which he had been raised called for the casting aside of those worldly values. The financial well-being of his paternal grandparents and uncles came from wigmaking and hairdressing, and while Pieter Mondriaan was their son and brother, the schoolmaster had eschewed such luxuries in his own life and that of his family. In spite of the large house in Winterswijk, Mondrian's father lived austerely and sought only to serve God and His demands. In his soul, Mondrian had not left the nest. Depicting Church and State, he patently confers greater worth on the purists than the pleasure-seekers.

The spiritual quest would dominate his life. Materialism would never attract him, the exception being a penchant for fine clothes, albeit in limited quantity. He would not resist vanity though; lifelong he would perpetually re-style his hair and his beard, mustache, or lack thereof. The main distinction though between the priorities Mondrian illustrated on that church pulpit and his own is that his form of the spiritual would in time be utterly joyous, and completely disconnected from worldly issues like monarchism and human status levels, all of which he would come to reject completely for an other-worldliness that would make the ambassador of Christianity look entirely parochial, as in fact she was.

Another panel shows an angel with enormous wings. Standing behind an ornate shield decorated with the Netherlands coat of arms, he clasps his hands in a position of prayer. The royal crest is replete with a very fancy crown, held upright by two lions who with their other front paws, brandish flags, with one flag bearing the queen's birth year—1880—and the other, her year of coronation, 1898.

These heavy-handed reliefs of symbolic figures and the trappings of royalty are a world apart from the unhierarchical, light-hearted paintings with which Mondrian would find his true voice some two decades later. But at age twenty-six, making the drawings that enabled him to pay his bills, he was slavishly faithful to the tenets of his father's neo-Conservatism. Giving the wood carver his task, in these scenes that look like costume plays in an amateur religious pageant, Mondrian did what was expected of him. Yet, he still revealed aspects of the burgeoning beliefs that he would eventually express more effectively in forms of his own invention; for all that is imitative rather than original in these pulpit carvings, they suggest the spiritual uplift of the later Mondrian's most sophisticated abstract compositions.

One of the oak panels Mondrian designed for the pulpit of the cavernous English church has a sun rising in the background. It represents

the same illumination: the capacity of brilliance to render what is irrelevantly invisible, and to evoke instead an infinitely powerful universal beauty. The elevation to a purer state, the chosen subservience of the mundane sides of existence for something more salubrious and more absolute, consistently dominated Piet Mondrian's beliefs; only the form would change.

XVII

Determined to have as many daylight hours as possible to work on his own painting, Mondrian did whatever he could to make money shy of taking a regular job. At the end of the 19th century he started to give drawing lessons to several Amsterdam ladies. We don't know how they initially encountered him, but they could afford his tutelage and were bent on improving themselves through art and books and religion. We don't know all their names, but among them were Catharina and Elisabeth Hogerzeil, Emmy Seelig, and Hannah Crabb.[341]

Mrs. Crabb was English, and while he dutifully taught her to draw, she gave Mondrian lessons in her native language. He made a bookplate for her in thanks.[342] He etched it in the same illustrative style as his pulpit designs, honoring her name with a crab risen on its many legs. He further embellished the bookplate with the symbols of Theosophy, which had become a new interest of his.

It is possible that the place young Mondrian had encountered his lady students was at meeting of the Theosophical Society, a social gathering place for believers in the faith that was growing in influence at the end of the nineteenth century. By the end of 1898 Lambertus van der Tuuk—who carved the church pulpit Mondrian had designed, the two of them collaborating closely during the process—might have introduced Mondrian to the new faith.[343] Mondrian had already drawn an emerging sun with spreading rays for the pulpit in the English Reformed Church. Stars, lotus blossom, and a rising sun—all of which he squeezed into the small bookplate for Mrs Crabb—were essential symbols of Theosophy.[344]

Theosophy had been codified in 1875 when Helena Blavatsky, a Russian woman who had traveled all over her native country and then to England, India, China, Tibet, Hungary, Italy, and France to study and preach her ideas of universal spiritualism, founded "The Theosophical Society" in New

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[341] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 26-27.
[342] A265 Ex Libris for H.H. Crabb, c.1900-05, lithograph, 10,5 x 11,8 cm, private collection.
[343] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 39; Marty Bax, *Het web der schepping. Theosofie en kunst in Nederland. Van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan*, SUN, Amsterdam 2006, p. 256-257.
[344] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 41.

York. Now gaining traction in the Netherlands, the Theosophical Society brandished the slogan, 'There is no Religion higher than Truth.'[345] It was a far cry from the 'Thy Word is Truth' Mondrian had painted in Winterswijk according to his father's design, for, rather than making the teachings of Jesus Christ the source of all that mattered in life, it was based on the idea that the highest values in earthly existence were based on truth itself: a non-sectarian, universal standard associated with no single individual or place or religious movement.

Madame Blavatsky defined Theosophy as 'the archaic wisdom-religion, the esoteric doctrine once known in every ancient country having claims to civilization.'[346] The principle goal of the Theosophical Society is 'to form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste, or color.'[347]

Madame Blavatsky lived as she preached. From a wealthy family, at an early age she enjoyed great material luxury. She moved from Odessa to Bucharest to Paris, always living in splendid accommodations and being wined and dined by her family's rich friends. Then, when she was about to embark on a ship to New York in her usual luxurious circumstances, she saw, on the deck, a poor woman who could not pay the fare for herself and her two children. Madame Blavatsky swapped her first-class ticket for four third-class tickets and made the two-week trip in steerage.[348]

Mondrian readily took to the idea that one's beliefs matter more than personal comfort. Initially, he was only dipping into Theosophy, but Madame Blavatsky's faith and practices confirmed the new direction his life was already taking. The rules and regulations of Calvinism held no sway for him; he was attracted to a sense of beauty and to a fascination with the universal, that relegated enforced denial and the idea of noble suffering to a position of no importance, and embraced a broaden sense of celebration. Materialism, too, counted for little. If one had what it took to survive while enjoying a higher purpose, life could be inestimably rich.

XVIII

Three days before Christmas of 1898, Mondrian moved yet again, this time to Albert Cuypstraat 158—another of Amsterdam streets named for a distinguished artist. It was near the Rijkmuseum, in De Pijp, the Bohemian

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[345] H.P. Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine*, The Theosophical Publishing Company, London 1888, p. xli.
[346] H.P. Blavatsky, 'What is Theosophy', in: *The Theosophist*, 1(1879)1, p. 3.
[347] Josephine Ransom, *A Short History of the Theosophical Society*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras 1989, p. 155.
[348] Sylvia Cranston, *H.P.B. The Extraordinary Life & Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Modern Theosophical Movement,* G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1993, p. 107-109.

section of the city inhabited by a combination of students, artists, and prostitutes.[349]

Even as he chose to live in the center of the largest metropolis in the Netherlands, the future urbanite for whom the hustle and bustle of Paris, London, and New York would become the necessities of his life and work, Mondrian at age twenty-six needed to escape for inspiration. He continued to go to the countryside whenever he had enough free time from his paying work. He painted bucolic scenes of village churches and rural life, and more than anything else, close-ups of trees. He focused on their trunks. He often used the top of the canvas to cut the tree just above at its base, so that the entire subject is a detail of where the tree emerges from the ground. The viewer knows what is off stage—the deep and complex root structure that supports these massive trunks, the branches above, and, except in winter, the leafy canopy—but Mondrian presents only the concentrated, muscular leg rising upwards in all of its majesty and strength.

Mondrian also drew farm women. He rendered these wizened creatures in a style similar to Van Gogh's *Potato Eaters*. Mondrian worked his lines instinctively yet assuredly, so that the pencil strokes are charged with restrained force. He would never manifest his emotion physically—Mondrian would not bear down with the sort of impact that threatens to tear the fibers of the paper, any more than he would fling paint—but in his controlled and disciplined style, he gives these hard-working old women great pathos. The empathy is new to his work; Mondrian was beginning to show more heart and human connection. His profound emotion toward trees and the forest and other natural sights had fired his work from the start, but the level of compassion was different.

He returned to Winterswijk frequently. Whether he actually enjoyed spending time with his mother or father, whether there was someone else in the town who beckoned him back, he undertook the long journey surprisingly often. Mondrian must have stayed back in the family home for substantial spells of time. He made further drawings of St. Jacob's Church, did paintings of the weavers' house on the Zonnebrink, and began to focus on the area of town called the Lappenbrink. The word, which means 'field of cloth,' demarcated the neighborhood where textiles were bleached by the sun. It was only a few minutes walk from the family house, and the making and coloring of materials captivated Mondrian. Inspired differently than ever before, Mondrian took the world around him and re-composed it in an unprecendented way. Transforming actual scenes into pictures where something very different was going on, he made a stride forward in his concept of what art could be.

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[349] Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers*, p. 48.

One of these Lappenbrink paintings—a large gouache of a farm girl—is totally startling.[350] Mondrian's family must have thought that he had totally taken leave of his senses.

The odd young woman of whom it is a portrait may well have been the reason Mondrian kept returning to his home town. Either she was an exceptionally strange human specimen who fascinated him, or she was a more normally constructed girl who had such an impact on him that she caused the young painter to see her in a distorted, bizarre way. She has an enormous head, and no neck; her face sits on top of her chest. It is as if Mondrian has put a mask on a real person: the sort of mask we associate with German Expressionism of a later date, and with the paintings of Emil Nolde. The young woman's lips and eyes are not representations so much as signs for those features, drawn as a child might have rendered them. Her contorted mouth, higher on the right side than on the left, has the roughness of a jackolantern carving.

Besides being physically grotesque, the young woman is in a psychologically altered state. Mondrian called this image, *On the Lappenbrink,* but the title, by calling attention to the location and not the woman, feels like a trick. Is she ecstatic, deranged, or both?

This hapless creature is clearly a working-class laborer. The white head scarf that hides all of her hair suggests a low level of servitude, as if she is obliged to make sure she is totally sanitary, and she is carrying a straw basket with eggs in it. She charges forward at an awkward gait, her shoulders hunched. Mondrian captures her at the last possible moment before she will have pushed past the spot which he makes his vantage point. The sense that she might knock into the viewer adds to the discomfort induced by this picture.

#

Was Mondrian deliberately evoking weirdness in this painting? I hate to use a word like "abnormal," with its suggestion that there are not many different types of people in the world, but I have to assume that most of you share my sense that the creature in *On the Lappenbrink* is off-the-charts bizarre. And that Mondrian accentuates that. The woman's other-worldly, out-of-body aura is intensified by the shimmering light on the tile roofs near the foreground and on a roof further back where the blast of the sunlight is so strong that it obliterates the distinctions between the tiles. The dramatic foreshortening of the street and the choppiness of the brushstrokes add to the frightening feeling of a world out of control. Is this a depiction of madness by plan, or is it a reflection of something gone wrong in the artist himself?

In this discomfiting, highly charged, peculiar portrait, Mondrian makes the act of carrying hen's eggs a catalyst for all sorts of musing. It is as if,

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[350] A68 Op de Lappenbrink, 1899, Gouache on paper, 128 x 99 cm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam.

with her wide eyes and wide smile, this modestly dressed farm girl is not just saying that eggs are miraculous—for how they are laid and constructed, and their nutritional value—but that this emotional transport is enough to make you crazy. The colors are the hues of religious revelation.

The folks back in Winterswijk must have considered Mondrian completely nuts with this painting. For better or for worse, he had given voice to a completely destabilizing intensity of feeling. But what was the issue? A local madwoman? Or Mondrian's own derangement about the subjects of young women and fertility?

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Most Mondrian scholars fumble about *On the Lappenbrink* (Fig. 10). Welsh describes it only as 'a depiction dated 1899 which relates in various ways to a number of other Winterswijk subjects previously executed this or the previous years.'[351] It is one of those sieve-like statements art historians make that have their readers and listeners shaking their heads affirmatively in a daze; while correct, it contains nothing of interest. This important painting has inspired a plethora of similar empty facts from other pundits; perhaps the image is so completely weird that people are frightened to explore it. The texts are all about who the work belonged to, how the streetscape changed, and the possible reasons that postcard publishers made few images of the Lappenbrink.[352]

Today in Winterswijk, when you walk down the street shown in the painting, you will see a large color reproduction of the painting, under glass, mounted on a post. No one appears to consider the issue that the woman is painted as if she is insane, or that the artist who rendered her in such a bizarre way was going through a period of confusion. All that seems to matter is that an artist who became famous worldwide, with his work commanding high prices, once stood on this very street and portrayed one of its habitués. Yet what is patently clear if we are willing to consider *On the Lappenbrink* honestly is that something very strange was taking place in the artist's life.

#

When he painted *On the Lappenbrink*, Mondrian was not in much better shape than his subject. In 1899, he had a photo taken of himself which he gave to his parents. In that gesture, he deliberately forced them to recognize how different he was from his brothers and from most everyone else in the family orbit. The photo, at least in my eyes shows the twenty-seven-year old with a full mustache and half a beard: it looks as if one side of his chin is shaved smooth, while the other is covered in a dense growth of hair. This was the sort of half-shaving that, a quarter of a century later, would fascinate visitors to the rue du Départ.[353] If I am right, what Mondrian had

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[351] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 120.
[352] Cf. Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 160-161.
[353] Cf. Oud, *Mondriaan de mens*, p. 70-71.

done with his own face was one of his first essays into geometric abstraction; it was, equally, a tidy symbol of a divided soul. Other people maintain that I am overreacting to a photograph in which half of the lower part of the face is simply in the shade. Even if this is so—and I see the half-shaving only because I know it was Mondrian's habit later in life—the impression of darkness juxtaposed to lightness is powerful.

Fig. 10. Mondrian, *On the Lappenbrink*, 1899

Mondrian's thick black hair, longer than the norm for the time period, is pouffed straight up vertically from his horizontal hairline, except for the locks which, on the other side of his precise left part, have been brushed downwards. The result is that the artist's high, large forehead has been articulated as a spacious white rectangle. Beneath the horizontal band made by his moustache and mouth, the vertical boundary created by the divided lower part of his face becomes an extension of the line formed by his long straight nose. His chin, separated in two equal parts, resembles traditional Dutch contrasting black and white marble floor tiles; what I see as the shaved side, of which the skin is as smooth as a baby's, catches the light so that its bulbous form has a soft glow, while the unshaved half (again, I realize this is debatable) is blanketed in matt darkness.

In this photo inscribed to his mother and father, Mondrian is looking upwards, as if transfixed. The expression on his face is a declaration that he is living somewhere else in his mind, that they can take it or leave it, but he is not like other people. His self-conscious posturing was a strong statement to the rule-abiding Calvinists back in Winterswijk. *On the Lappenbrink*

manifests the same schism as his face in the photo. Mondrian had entered territory that defied easy understanding.

His new awkwardness also became evident in unsettling renderings of farmyards and riverscapes, subject matter he had previously approached in the traditional Hague School style but now painted as blockier and bolder. In *Wood with Beech Trees* (Fig. 11),[354] c. 1899, a watercolor and gouache, the forest floor zooms into the background at vertiginous speed, and the trees are gargantuan. The earth reaches a pointed peak at the top of the painting, but no matter how long we study this painting it remains unclear if that triangle of soil on which dead leaves are strewn is a hill rising upward or a flat expanse that juts into a lake along a shoreline that appears to have been cut with oversized sheers. A stand of bare tree trunks that we see close-up marches toward the ambiguous triangle like a group of gigantic soldiers of which we see only the boot-covered calves.

Fig. 11. Mondrian, *Woods with Beech Trees*, c. 1899

This bizarre semi-abstract rendition of a natural scene gives the sense that the artist is growing the way the tree trunks are, reaching high but in an uncertain direction. Mondrian's confreres in Amsterdam were either painting according to academic tradition or, in a few instances, braving the territory opened by Van Gogh and applying brighter colors in heavy globs of pigment; Mondrian was experimenting in a way that was entirely his own. *Wood with Beech Trees*, with its powerful verticals standing firm across the

[354] A88 Wood with Beech Trees, c.1899, Watercolor and gouache on paper, 45,5 x 57 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

puzzling conflux of diagonals and horizontals, and its air and sky which are ever-present and refreshing, embodies a totally original vision.

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Something in Mondrian was out of control, and now, rather than fight it, he gave voice to his frenzy. That same year, he made another painting that is impossible to fathom fully. *Two Girls in a Wood* (Fig. 12)[355] is set in the exact same wooded area and in front of the identical triangular horizon as *Wood with Beech Trees*. The girls are even more mysterious than the setting. Where on earth did Mondrian ever get the idea to paint faces in this way? They are nothing but flesh-colored brushwork with dashes of dark paint to constitute their mouths, noses, and eyes.

The most that any of the Mondrian scholars has managed to say about this very odd double portrait is that the subjects are identified as 'girls' rather than 'women' because they still show their long hair and don't wear the bonnets required of females in the Achterhoeck once they reached puberty and were eligible for marriage.[356] No one dares address why the girls look something between comic and crazy, and appear to have disembodied heads that merge into the landscape that is so abstract.

There is no easy explanation. But this otherness, this transport into a vague ecstasy distinguished Mondrian now more than ever.

Fig. 12. Mondrian, *Two Girls in a Wood*, c. 1898-1899

[355] A91 Two Girls in a Wood, c. 1898-99, Oil on paper, mounted on cardboard, 27,3 x 37,9 cm, Musée Départemental du Prieuré, Saint-Germain-en-Laye.
[356] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 191.

XIX

When he returned to Amsterdam after doing those puzzling paintings in Winterswijk, Mondrian decorated the entire, large dining room ceiling of the fancy townhouse of a rich doctor, Abraham van de Velde.[357] Van de Velde lived at 608 Keizergracht, one of the city's most fashionable canals. This project which was his full-time work into 1899 was completely different from his small canvases of young women in dazzling sunlight.[358] The crazed faces of his subjects, their skin that shimmered like the colorful fabrics drying in this Winterswijk neighborhood, were replaced by classical figures out of mythology; the approach of an artist overcome by intense, if incomprehensible emotions was supplanted by the slavishness of a diligent craftsman excecuting a commission strictly according to the rulebook.

The expanse Mondrian painted was an octagon that measured 430 x 510 cm at its widest and longest.[359] It was meant to entertain everyone who entered the luxurious house, and, above all, to wow people when they looked up from the table during elaborate lunches and dinners when the intervals between the sequence of courses gave guests ample opportunity to study what was above them while one set of fancy dishes was replaced by another. Mondrian's scenario was framed by elaborate molding, with an ornately paneled ceiling around it; a gold chain descended from its center point to hold a chandelier. The scheme the twenty-seven-year-old artist composed featured winged putti, garlands of fruit and flowers, and sheaves of grain, the coup de grace being a cherub who was a portrait of the client's three-year-old son.

If you showed the world's hundred most distinguished art historians and critics a photo of this lavish decoration Mondrian made on the dining room ceiling, and without giving any hints, asked them to say who did it, no one would come up with the answer that it was Piet Mondrian. To succeed at his assigned task, the artist painted in a style in which his own taste and instincts are absent. The putti with their oversized wings are in a puff of pink-tinged cumulous clouds. The intertwined chains of flowers are excessively elaborate, as if the sheer quantity of blossoms increases their worth. The cherubs—wide-eyed, full-lipped, pug-nosed, and pouting—are cloying. Looking at their pudgy arms and golden curls and feathery white wings, we ask: Mondrian? Is this possible?

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[357] A133 Ceiling Decoration: The Four Seasons, 1899, Oil on canvas, 430 x 510 cm, 608 Keizersgracht Amsterdam.

[358] H.L.C. Jaffé, 'Een gedateerde plafondschildering door Piet Mondriaan', in: H.L.C. Jaffé, *Over utopie en werkelijkheid in de beeldende kunst. Verzamelde opstellen van H.L.C. Jaffé (1915-1984)*, Meulenhoff/Landshoff, 1986, p. 56.

[359] The work is painted on canvas and was inserted into the ceiling on the spot. Jaffé, *plafondschildering*, p. 57.

The work, in fact, is signed and dated, and can still be seen in the reception room overlooking the garden of this fine house which encapsulates the life style of well-heeled Amsterdam residents in a period of new and immense prosperity. If you want to see Mondrian's ceiling today, and the current owner grants you access, you will discover that it has been restored, but you can still envision Mondrian as he was in 1899, diligently forming one flower after another, doing his best to study the face of three-year-old Hendrik, too young and restless to sit still, in order to paint him as a cherub.[360] This particular cherub has no wings—an important detail, for it signifies that he is alive and of this earth; when a cherub has wings, he is enjoying the afterlife.

Hendrik's head, which stares down at us, is positioned next to the center disk from which the chandelier is suspended and is about the same size as the disk. He looks like a soap advertisement. Representing cleanliness and innocence, the little boy rules this allegory of the four seasons. Spring is represented by flowers, summer by apples and grapes suspended from a garland, fall by a sheaf of wheat alongside a rake, and winter by some figures who are asleep and others holding warm insulating draperies; the child's purity reigns supreme over all of it.

When we focus on Hendrik—as we naturally do, given his position near the ceiling's center, and his radiant presence—we realize that although superficially this ceiling is completely out of character for Piet Mondrian at any stage of his art-making, in its spiritual aspect it is totally consistent with the rest of his work from woodland views to abstractions, and is true to an obsession he always had. Even making what appears to be a Rococo confection more than an art work of its own time, Mondrian was fired by his driving passion for a state of being that is not subject to conflict and difficulty. Three-year-old Hendrik, in his role as cherub, flourishes in that trouble-free sphere which was Mondrian's ideal mental world.

Unlike his father's concept of paradise was, the territory Mondrian sought as an alternative to normal earthly existence did not depend on a notion of God in the Christian sense. Rather, it was like Mozart's chamber music, or the sea, or the sky: some glorious realm undisturbed by emotional pain or material desires.

For all of the iconographical complexity and traditional figuration, the ceiling in the center of Amsterdam, while it does not resemble a Mondrian as we know his work, offers that same idyllic state of being as the later canvases. The luminous white background that serves as the setting for

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[360] Restored in 1994 by Joop van Litsenburg, see: J.H. van Litsenburg, *Restauratie en conservatie van een plafondschildering van Piet Mondriaan in een grachtenpand aan de Keizersgracht in Amsterdam*, Litsenburg, Amsterdam 1994; Jaffé provided the account that it is 3-year-old Hendrik van de Velde, second son of doctor Van de Velde, who has been portrayed as the wingless cherub near the centre of the composition. Jaffé, *plafondschildering*, p. 59.

rhythmic action in the dining room on Keizergracht has that spectral otherness that makes Mondrian's mature work so uplifting. If one could hang the *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, with its lively play of squares against the whites, in the Van de Veldes' dining room, the parallels with the ceiling would be surprising.

The color tinting a cloud also predicts Mondrian's future art. In the upcoming years, Mondrian would specialize in painting skies, with the cumulous clouds carrying color, his efforts culminating in 1905 in his ravishing *The Red Cloud*. Above all, there is, in the ceiling, a perpetual swirl of movement—a non-stop interplay of the individual elements—that would be one of the salient traits of Mondrian's art lifelong. The pulsing motion and everlasting rhythm are what makes Mondrian's work, immortal, in all phases.

XX

The church bells that rang at midnight on December 31, 1899 announced the start of a new century. The transformation in Mondrian's art was not that precise—his increased clarity and authority came as part of a gradual progression, not a sudden leap—but, still, as the twentieth century was born, Mondrian notably emerged from the morass of the previous year and found a more comfortable voice.

A lot of the paintings he had made to date are well achieved, and show some of Mondrian's future vigor and feeling for light, but he had been floundering since leaving the Academy. Mondrian had tried different artistic approaches as peripatetically as he switched living accommodations. Paintings like *The Young Princess*, and the gold-tinged still-lifes with heavy draperies behind complex arrangements of flowers and bibelots that Mondrian produced to keep food on the table, adhere to other people's rules. At the opposite end of the spectrum, *On the Lappenbrink* and *Two Girls in a Wood* showed him in his own unknowable world. Sometimes he complied with the prevailing taste, while at other moments he did the unprecedented. Mondrian at the start of 1900 was not yet resolving his demons—he would continue, for another decade, to make, at unpredictable moments, peculiar images of people in other-worldly states, and, periodically, to paint as if he were half-mad—but he was gaining the discipline to express his originality more cogently.

One of his first triumphs at the start of the twentieth century was with paintings of chrysanthemums. Previously, his flower paintings had been traditional bouquets in vases on highly varnished tables and against backdrops of draperies. Perfectly suitable to posh Amsterdam interiors, they were in the manner of many other artists. Now Mondrian began to simplify the subject radically. He isolated the flowers by eliminating the setting. Initially he presented three blossoms and their long stems. Then he further

reduced the elements to single buds emerging from plain glass tubes. That rendered them timeless.

Unlike Mondrian's previous pictures, the images of flowers do not attempt to replicate a corner of the world. Rather, they zoom in on a detail and frame and isolate it. He cut off these compositions of individual or small numbers of flowers in unusual ways. He sometimes broke the field of vision in the middle of the cylindrical vase, sometimes across the leaves or petals at the top of the flowers. With the realistic background now gone, the result is a concentration of force. The individual flowers enabled him to enter the realm that was becoming increasingly important to him: a haven of serenity, of universal and timeless values, of transformative visual beauty. They are a stepping stone to the solid rectangles of his later work.

Painting these single flowers, Mondrian was composing with new authority. Chrysanthemums, with their extraordinary forms, captivated him, and he invested each flower with a visual dynamism. These flowers, like underwater plants, more dramatic than pretty, are rendered to be mysterious and full of surprises. Each individual chrysanthemum appears as a persona. Some of them pose proudly and flaunt their charms; others shyly retreat from us, as if embarrassed to be seen naked.

Some of the flowers Mondrian portrays are at their peaks; others are on their way out. The ones with wilting leaves and petals appear inhabited by spirits from another world; they are macabre, and ghost-like. These flowers that Mondrian painted in 1900 and 1901 are totally different from the way he or anyone else had ever presented flowers before.[361] By abandoning ornate vases and golden wallpaper, putting behind him all that was old-fashioned, and quaint, Mondrian had entered new, liberating territory. Once he was painting these solitary chrysanthemums, his art acquired a new emotional pitch. The flowers seem to represent something other than themselves—as if they are anthropomorphic creatures, with personalities—and their force, rather than being worn on the surface, comes from within. One bud is almost savage, the spidery petals like tentacles of a sea creature: a haggard comedienne, trying against the odds to show her beauty. Another, in full bloom, celebrates living at its peak. The human qualities come through more effectively than when Mondrian actually painted human beings.

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[361] A109 Upright Chrysanthemum against a Brownish Ground, 1900; A110 Upright Chrysanthemum against a Blue-Gray Ground, 1901. Cf. Welsh, *Early Career*, p. 56-57: '[…] earliest datable representation of the single flower motif by Mondrian […] there is no reason to think that […] such a work must de facto relate to either the Dutch or broader European Symbolist movement […] Mondrian had succeeded in synthesizing a uniquely personal style out of various influences.'

A new friend of Mondrian's, Albert van den Briel, sometimes accompanied Mondrian to the flower vendor's. Van den Briel and Mondrian had met for the first time in September of 1900. The nineteen-year-old, just out of secondary school and about to enter medical school, was fascinated by the very particular habits of the twenty-eight-year-old artist. Mondrian selected the buds he would paint with utmost care and Van den Briel, intrigued, did his best to understand what made his new friend tick.

In an unpublished text he wrote half a century later and would call *On Mondrian's personality,* Van den Briel would describe Mondrian studying the blossoms he was considering for purchase, often reducing the salesperson to a state of 'despair.' The vendors' normal clients were men buying their girlfriends pretty bouquets and people selecting gifts to cheer up the sick. The beleaguered flower sellers could not understand the search of their silent customer who carefully studied the petal structure and color of each individual flower with some unstated goal they could not begin to fathom. Mondrian would examine a single blossom like a technician in a medical lab. He calibrated the precise width of the petals and the size of the gaps between them, and also studied the shapes of the leaves with mental calculations beyond anyone else's grasp. Mondrian, Van den Briel knew even if the flower sellers did not, was in part imagining the future progress of the blossoms as they withered and died. He was not sure at which stage he would paint them, but he was considering what lay ahead for the possibilities. After what felt to the vendor like an interminable period of contemplation, Mondrian would then buy a single stem. On rare occasions, he would acquire as many as three. But never had the vendor seen a client devote so much time to such a small purchase.[362]

XXI

Mondrian has started to come out of his shell socially. He had befriended Simon Maris, an amiable young painter who knew lots of people and who regularly attented plays and concerts, and Maris occasionally persuaded him to come along to one or another of these events. In September 1900, at a performance of *Hedda Gabler* at the Stadsschouwburg, an Amsterdam theatre, Mondrian by chance meets Albert van den Briel.[363] Maris had also

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[362] Van den Briel*, 'Mondriaan's persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0613, inv. nr. 2.

[363] 'Ik ging naar een uitvoering van Heda Gabler van Ibsen in de Stadsschouwburg […] ik zat op de goedkoopste rang heel hoog, en toevallig naast M[ondriaan].', letter Van den Briel to Robert Welsh, December 15 1967, RKD #0632, inv.nr. 20. This meeting must have taken place in September, 1900. Hedda Gabler was performed by theater association Het Nederlandsch Tooneel, at the Stadsschouwburg Amsterdam. See: R.G.C. van der Zalm, *Ibsen op de planken. Een ensceneringsgeschiedenis van het werk van Henrik Ibsen in*

helped Mondrian meet other painters as well as collectors and gallerists, but the younger Van den Briel, a medical student—of sufficient culture to go to Ibsen plays and art exhibitions, but outside Maris's usual circle—was the one Mondrian liked the most.

Albert van den Briel had been born in 1881 in the small village of Stratum, near the city of Eindhoven. He was the oldest of three children, their father a manufacturer of lines of various sorts, and when he was thirteen years old his family moved to Amsterdam when his father started a new business there. At the time that he met Mondrian, Van den Briel was doing his medical studies in Utrecht, but still living at home with his parents at the Weesperzijde.[364]

Part of Van den Briel's appeal was that, from the start, he considered Mondrian extraordinary. He had never before encountered anyone with such 'inner strength and stability,' qualities the future doctor attributed to what he termed the 'unity of man-painter,' and by what he termed the 'oneness of man and artist.'[365] Van den Briel was captivated by the way that everything in Mondrian's personality guided his painting, just as his making of art determined how he lived. The impressionable Van den Briel also witnessed Mondrian becoming involved with social and political movements, to an extent unusual among artists of the time period. To the nineteen-year-old, those concerns outside the realm of most everyone else in the clique of fashionable young painters that had formed around Maris, made Mondrian all the more appealing.

Here Albert van den Briel is responsible for our knowing about a side of Mondrian's life that has largely escaped the record. By the turn of the century, the artist had become surprisingly leftist.

The 'surprisingly' is because Mondrian had grown up in a staunchly Royalist household, and he personally had adhered to the family's views right through Queen Wilhelmina's coronation in 1898. His foray into the world of anarchists and other radicals was a short-lived, isolated episode in his life—by 1904, he would become entirely apolitical, an attitude he would maintain for the rest of his life. But in this period when Mondrian started to spend more time with other people, he became interested in social reform. Van den Briel discovered that, both in the neighborhood where he lived and on his outings to paint at places like the Royal Wax Factory, Mondrian had befriended a number of factory workers and had joined in their struggle against management for more equitable treatment.[366]

Nederland 1880-1995, Uitgeverij International Theatre & Film Books, Amsterdam 1999, p. 401.

[364] Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 147-148.

[365] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[366] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

Within days of their meeting at the performance of *Hedda Gabler*, Mondrian invited Van den Briel to his studio. The medical student had never before seen anything remotely like the place where Mondrian was both living and working. It was both overcrowded with things and very small. Mondrian had a profusion of antique furniture and objects in polished copper. A double 12-armed old Dutch church chandelier made of the same glistening copper as all the pots and lamps and fireplace tools was suspended from the ceiling. Cashmere shawls covered the walls, with Japanese prints hanging in front of them.

Nothing was by chance, however. Mondrian had deliberately hung all but one of the ornately patterned cashmere shawls turned around, so that their backs faced outwards. They were more muted than the fronts, which suited him both because he was preserving the value of the shawls by preventing them from fading and because the duller surfaces established his preferred ambiance. The soft materials hanging over the plaster absorbed the bright glow of the chandelier creating a warm, slightly golden light. This was the visual atmosphere in which Mondrian preferred to work. The one shawl that he hung so that its front was facing out was, he told Van den Briel, his favorite. It had horizontal stripes of contrasting colors. The design was completely unlike the paisley and floral patterns of the others.[367] His preference for that single cashmere shawl is the first evidence we have of Piet Mondrian being attracted to bold geometry. But his taste was for now completely old-fashioned compared to what it would be, and the plethora of objects and colors and forms, optically multiplied by all the reflections in the copper, were, at least superficially, the opposite of the whiteness and piercing primary colors with which Mondrian would eventually surround himself on the rue du Départ.

Yet for all the stylistic differences, the clutter of this Amsterdam studio reflected the same overwhelming urge Mondrian had to make his environment totally coherent. He had created an all-encompassing retreat. Like his future Paris and London and New York studios, the small space where Mondrian lived alone made it possible for him to inhabit a private world. He had chosen every detail according to his own taste and carefully created a setting that permitted him total focus. Mondrian told Van den Briel that the cashmere shawls provided a 'tone.'[368] Not only did they soften the visual experience of his digs, but they had an acoustical effect which guaranteed that the studio was quieter than would otherwise have been the case in central Amsterdam.The nineteen-year-old Van den Briel walking into that unique environment, was utterly fascinated with the painter who was unlike anyone else he knew.

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[367] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 2.
[368] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 2.

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Van den Briel began practically Mondrian's shadow. He accompanied the artist on painting outings, and invited him to his parents' house. This for Mondrian, was a sort of home he had never known before. For the first time in his life, Mondrian saw what it was to indulge in guiltless pleasures, and his new friend's parents nurtured him warmly in a style he had not experienced, or even observed, growing up. Over half a century later, Van den Briel would recall 'If M. was restless, he went out on a very old bike, to which an entire inventory of painting equipment hung, to draw some studies. Or he came to visit me more often than usual. I was by then still a student, and had just passed my first examination, and he then came to have dinner with us at the Weesperzijde, and carefully tasted the wine. […] After dinner M. especially enjoyed one of the excellent cigars which my father had. It was always remarkable to see M. in that milieu, completely at ease, also towards my mother, and Piet and Sis, and of course my mother used to pamper him also, and she thought it scary, those smaller wrists and delicate fingers, if she compared those with my coarse hands. Often M. said, when I brought him home: "See, now I can work much better tomorrow.'"[369]

While Mondrian enjoyed these new emotional and material luxuries thanks to Van den Briel, his young admirer marveled at Mondrian's approach to human existence completely new to *him*. What struck Van den Briel above all was both the dominant role Mondrian gave to the making of art, but also Mondrian's passionate engagement with whatever interested him. Mondrian was forever discussing the ideas of Ibsen's plays, of which he frequently attended performances. He also had a new fascination with psychic events, and began to obsess more than before not just about Theosophy and several other new spiritual movements. Mondrian began investigating different programs to help the economically disenfranchised, and protect workers' rights, and whatever he did, he did wholeheartedly. He showed no particular interest, meanwhile, in his own state of mind or personal comforts, physical or emotional; what mattered to him were his causes.

Mondrian, however, tried to stay on the sidelines concerning specific political parties or action groups. He had seen how much his father suffered trying to work with organizations and movements. Mondrian knew what happens when people band together for what is supposedly a good cause: the inevitable divisiveness and internecine conflicts. He would not subject himself to similar battles, wasting time with controversy rather than productive action, and risk being hurt as his father had been. Pieter Mondriaan was still bitter over his feud with Abraham Kuyper and his

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[369] Letter Albert van den Briel aan J.M. Harthoorn, as quoted in: Herbert Henkels, *'t is alles een groote eenheid, Bert. Piet Mondriaan, Albert van den Briel en hun vriendschap*, Joh. Enschede en zonen, Haarlem 1988, p. 81.

ostracization from the sect he had helped strengthen; Mondrian would not allow himself to be similarly disappointed.

Besides, nothing was to interfere with his art. He might succeed or fail as a painter, but he would not be at the mercy of a group or teamed. He was compelled to do what he could for society's underdogs and to help the labor force—at least for this brief period in the first three years of the 20th century—but he avoided organization dynamics and personal relationships which, even though based on shared beliefs, would have too high a price. At least that was the plan.

#

Pursuing his own training to become a doctor, Van den Briel considered Mondrian to be as truly alive as anyone he had ever met. He was keenly aware of the quirks that accompanied the passion, the compulsive fear, for example, of spiders and other insects alongside the intense devotion to understanding and evoking a larger, more generalized, life force.

'That Mondrian, as a landscape painter, was a lover of life, he wanted to inhale life and then exhale it in the form of paintings. The basic outlays originated as studies ("little studies", Mondrian called them) made in the open air: a clump of trees, an expanse of water, a meadow, later also with cattle, an orchard or pollard willows, also buildings [...] Nature as a whole, however, was only of partial interest to him, which attitude may be summed up by saying that Mondrian dealt mainly with macro-nature. Nevertheless, gradually also cows etc. made their appearance in the landscape. Not surprisingly, he valued the black-and-white cows purely as color-planes. The rest of the animal world, which one might term micro-nature, never held much interest for him as an artist.'[370]

In the warm, gold-tinged light of his studio with its cashmere-covered walls, Mondrian was deploying color with new effectiveness in his latest village scenes and landscapes. He could establish the precise position of a brick house by using just the right muted red for it, and regulate the tone of the green leaves of a tree so that its precise hue is what locates it in a field in front of the house. Mondrian used color and light intensity not just to place things within the picture space but also to create movement backward and forward. It is unlikely that he saw Henri Matisse's work of the same time period, but not far away, in Le Cateau-Cambrésis in northern France, Matisse was, similarly, using color as a means of construction; the palette was different, but the cultivation of the skill to have the precise tone of red or a blue serve to place a subject within the space evoked by a painting was much the same.

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In these paintings Mondrian made from 1900 to 1903, themes that of their own accord have little appeal become rich. Mondrian gave allure to a power

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[370] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

house in an industrial wasteland; the colors and forms in his rendition of the dreary sight painting create a system of echoes and balances that is utterly charming. Whether he was painting pretty flowers or ugly factories, Mondrian related the different elements, to animate the composite result. He juxtaposed the delicate, thin petals that comprise the blossom of a single chrysanthemum as if they are parts of a fabulous coordinated machine. Each petal accommodates the adjacent ones, pivoting as required in order to fill the available space. More and more, Mondrian was making his art about relationships. Every color and every shape connects over a void to the others; no element stands isolated.

When Mondrian painted a landscape in the toned down, gray-tinged colors of dusk, he accorded each hue the same light intensity, assuring an overall harmony. The distant mauve sky in a river scene plays against its own subdued reflection in the water in the foreground; the mirror image echoes its source, becoming a fascinating variation rather than mere repetition while, here too, a complex balance results. This quality of resolution, charged with perpetual movement but nonetheless synchronized with each of the many elements functioning in tandem with the others, is one of the salient characteristics of Piet Mondrian's art from these early Dutch genre scenes through the Boogies Woogies.

Invariably, while establishing an overarching order, he played verticals and horizontals against one another and opposed certain colors to avoid being static. Soaring chimneys reflected in calmly flowing rivers, masts towering over boats, and trees boldly declaring themselves against the horizon are among the elements that animate these paintings from the start of the new century. Light skies vibrate against dark foliage; laundry on a line gleams white in front of a deep brown wall. The particular way Mondrian cropped his imagery, using the picture edge to cut off trees and masts, emphasizes the idea of art as a contrivance—paintings are windows that frame chosen details of life; they are not life itself—and makes potent the yin and yang of upwards and across, dark and light. Twenty years later, purifying the forms as perfect rectangles, going flat out with bright primary colors against the pitch blacks, Mondrian would present such vertical-horizontal interplay and the light-dark syncopation in paintings unprecedented in the history of art. In these paintings of the Amsterdam suburbs, he did not yet use the undiluted brilliant blues of the later work—the skies are always cloudy—and he adhered to the goal of making convincing images of the known world. But his love for a visual pulse, for transactions between forms and colors and the consequent rhythm, was already what was driving him forward.

#

Mondrian was now putting more light and air in the paintings than he had when he was at the Academy and in the years immediately following. Now, in even the smallest landscapes, the canvas dematerializes and becomes a transparent opening to a living universe. As the viewer imagines himself

passing beyond the picture plane and entering the scene, he can breathe it in. With increased sharpness and assuredness, Mondrian provides generous expanses of space and oxygen and light for the mental journey to the far side of a calm river bed, down winding roads, into farmyards, or into other bucolic settings.

Approaching the age of thirty, he was painting with grace and confidence. When he was engaged in the act of painting, he was, quite simply, supremely happy, and the scenes of rural life all celebrate both nature and art. He depicts a single tree near the river Gein so that the construction is utterly solid, with brushwork that resembles Cézanne's applied authoritatively so that the perfectly straight tree trunk soars heavenward. Painting similar subjects a few years earlier, Mondrian had often been somewhat stilted and academic, his approach more tame. Now he has mastered his technique and gained a new capacity to invigorate the overall composition and convey pleasure.

In a great number of these small canvases of cows, picket fences, trees, windmills, barns, factories, irrigation ditches, and boatyards, there is water in the foreground. It is the vehicle for complex optical mirroring that like painting itself, is illusory. The foliage in the river is, of course, only a reflection, like one's face in looking glass. Mondrian was increasingly at home in the world of light effects; weightless, cerebral, and without physical substance, they had a quality of the holy spirit.

This was not, however, the God of his childhood, terrifying and insistent on self-denial as an essential component of a worthy life. Mondrian was discovering that a joyful appreciation of the givens of the universe could be the crux of his existence. It was a splendid alternative to a life based on pain, the chronic state of punishment he had illustrated in *Christ's Heirs*. He was finding his way toward celebration, and toward the poetry of life—and ridding himself of the strictures that stood in their way.

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In 1942, Mondrian wrote an essay in which he reflected back on these paintings he made when he was trying to find his way in Amsterdam. The text was for the catalogue of an exhibition of his work at the Valentine Gallery, in New York.[371] The intrepid gallery director, Valentine Dudensing, was a man of rare vision and courage thanks to whom, some of the century's most original artists felt seriously respected even though the larger public mocked their work. Duddensing had great power of persuasion, which is why Mondrian agreed to write this text in which he addressed subjects he normally avoided.

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[371] *Toward the True Vision of Reality* is Mondrian's only explicitly autobiographical essay, written in spring 1941 and published as a pamphlet by the Valentine Gallery, New York, in connection with his first exhibition in the United States (January-February 1942), see: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 338.

Mondrian allow that these small landscapes and flower paintings he had painted forty years earlier shed light on the real nature of the abstract art he had been making since the end of World War I.

'I preferred to paint landscape and houses seen in grey, dark weather or in very strong sunlight, when the density of atmosphere obscures the details and accentuates the large outlines of objects. I often sketched by moonlight—cows resting or standing immovable on flat Dutch meadows, or houses with dead, blank windows. I never painted these things romantically, but from the beginning I was always a realist. Even at this time, I disliked particular movement, such as people in action. I enjoyed painting flowers, not bouquets, but a single flower at a time, in order that I might better express its plastic structure.'[372]

Mondrian was too modest to announce his own achievement, but while he did not reproduce motion in his art, he created it. He also made light occur. Even the paintings of inert subjects like farmhouses are rhythmically charged with the vibration of form and color that is the essence of Mondrian's artistry.

His definition of himself as a 'realist' and not a 'romantic' is debatable, though. A person may, of course, describe himself any way he wants, and because Mondrian made few statements about himself, this one has had a lot of traction. It gets quoted as one of the few known truths about Mondrian.[373] I see it differently. All that it tells us is how Mondrian *wanted* to be regarded. By 1942, he had a sufficient coterie to imagine that people would accept his snippets about his life as inviolable gifts, and he expected this distinction of himself as a 'realist' to stick. The definition of romanticism, however, emphasizes the qualities of imagination and individualism, an excitement at the wonder of life, a feeling for mystery, a tendency to idealize.

XXII

Although he managed to buy theatre tickets and occasionally meet his new friends in cafés, Mondrian in the first couple of years of the twentieth century, was struggling to make ends need. He gave art lessons to the daughters of the Calvinist pastor Hendricus Vredenrijk Hogerzeil in exchange for the meals he would have after teaching the girls how to paint.[374]

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[372] Piet Mondrian, 'Toward the True Vision of Reality', in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 338-341.

[373] For instance: Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 25: 'Mondrian believed that "to paint" was synonymous with "to represent reality"; not to illustrate thoughts, ideas, and scenes idealistically, but to render them purely and simply in terms of what the artist sees. For this reason we reject the approach that views Mondrian's work as the simple vehicle of spiritual content.'

[374] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 26.

But on other nights he ate in a church soup kitchen where dinner was served free to people in need.[375]

He was not completely destitute, though. When he lined up with homeless people, and, like them, held out his plate to have modest grub ladled onto it, it was often because he was so absorbed in painting that he had forgotten to get groceries and simply wanted a meal without having to think about it. And even when he ate in soup kitchens, he dressed impeccably.[376]

Mondrian did not yet have his own tailor, as he would in Paris, but he still kept up with the latest fashions. When he attended the latest performance of Ibsen, or needed to show up at the home of one of his prosperous Calvinist clients who commissioned portraits, he wore dark suits that fit correctly, the spread of his shirt collar (invariably white) in perfect harmony with the lapels of the jacket. After all, angles count. So does one's façade.

#

Mondrian's entire objective, however, was to give himself as much time as possible in the privacy of his studio. Aside from the time he had to devote each week to portrait commissions and giving art lessons, he used all the remaining hours of daylight to paint the landscapes and flower studies that, even though he hoped he might sell them, were his personal exploration. But after nightfall, he needed human congress. What would be recounted for posterity are the occasions when he talked with, or at least to, other painters. Mondrian enjoyed being respected by other artists of his approximate age who were making their way in Amsterdam, and depended on them to connect him with a support system where art was prized. He avoided deeper friendship with them, but there was true rapport. It now seems that Mondrian's only real intimacy was with his fellow anarchists—in particular another man, one who lived for radical politics—but if their affair is true, Mondrian kept it hidden, or at least others did not discuss it, until the story exploded in the summer of 1904.

In the side of his life that others witnessed, the one of his new artist-companions with whom Mondrian spent the most time was Simon Maris. Maris, a painter one year Mondrian's junior, was the son of Willem Maris, a venerated master of The Hague School. Simon had been studying art in Antwerp, and arrived in Amsterdam in the second week of January, 1900.[377]

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[375] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[376] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[377] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 29. It could be that Mondrian met Simon Maris already in 1899 because Maris lived in Weesp for some time and used to go painting nearby cafe De Vink at the Gein river (where Mondrian was a regular guest), see: Paul Gorter, 'Piet Mondriaan en Simon Maris. Een teruggevonden vriendschap', in: *Vrij Nederland*, January 24, 1998, p. 38.

He was a society painter, and made his living mostly by doing portraits of rich people and government officials, but his affluent clients also bought his genre scenes and were proud to own work signed by "Maris"—even if Simon lacked the skill that had earned his father such a vaunted reputation.

Mondrian and Maris had different ideas of what it meant to be an artist, yet each respected the other's choices. They were so different in their goals and artistic priorities, as well as their life-styles, that there was no competition between them. The commercially successful, traditional-abiding portraitist of the elite, and the impecunious seeker of new ways of painting, would maintain contact until Maris died in 1935. There were plenty of other artists whose values more closely resembled Mondrian's own; but what counted in his friends was their decency and amiability. Moreover, Maris would be crucially helpful to Mondrian, and did so happily. [378]

Simon Maris provided the schoolmaster's son from remote Winterswijk entrée into a new milieu desirable for its sheer luxuriousness as well as the camaraderie of warm-hearted fellow artist who were happy to introduce Mondrian to their patrons and to influential critics and art dealers. Maris himself was prosperous because of both the fortune his father had made as a painter and his well-paying portrait commissions, which he landed readily as his father's son. But he was neither spoiled nor complacent. Maris was adventurous, and even if the status quo worked well for him, he was open to new approaches. Few other people appreciated Mondrian's unusual images of flowers and the radical approach to color and form apparent even in his seemingly traditional scenes of village life. An even smaller number of individuals who saw pictures like *On the Lappenbrink* had any idea about what to do with them. Maris was happy to have his studio serve as a safe harbor for his less successful friend. The prosperous portraitist introduced Mondrian to his own clients, bought work for himself, and became Mondrian's most important support.[379] Their relationship would, over a span of the next three decades, be a lifeline for Mondrian.

Maris's studio was at Spui, on the corner of Kalverstraat. It was a fashionable location at the center of town, a far cry from Mondrian's small space in its rough and trouble neighborhood. On Saturday afternoons, Maris would hold an open house for befriended artists, such as Arnold Marc Gorter, Marinus van Raalte, Lizzy Ansingh and Hendrik Kroon.[380] Most were Mondrian's fellow-members of Arti et Amicitiae, or St. Lucas. On May 21, 1933, at a celebration for Maris's sixtieth birthday, Lizzy Ansingh, a painter three years younger than Mondrian who also belonged to the two organizations, made a speech in which she recalled that the studio was

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[378] Gorter, 'Piet Mondriaan en Simon Maris.', p. 38-39.
[379] Gorter, *Piet Mondriaan en Simon Maris*, p. 38.
[380] Paul Gorter i.s.m. Frans van Burkom & Joop M. Joosten, 'Mies Maris' vergeten 'Mondriana", in: *Jong Holland. Tijdschrift voor kunst en vormgeving na 1850*, 14(1998)2, p.22-26.

'where women painters poured tea and Piet Mondriaan gently murmuring tried to make clear his ideals.'[381] She gives the impression of his being isolated within himself, delivering an incomprehensible monologue earnestly but ineffectively. As always, he was the respected outsider.

Since Maris had more money than the others, and was generous, he often invited the assembled poets, critics, and painters for dinner in his house following the gatherings. The food was taken from a neighboring restaurant and all they had to do was bring their own silverware.[382] Anyone who decided on the life of an artist could not expect frills, and at least there was enough to eat. Over dinner, Mondrian continued his discourse. He promulgated a way of life with personal sacrifices. In his 'murmering,' he linked Theosophy and social values and the making of art. Having been brought up to believe that idealism was what counted, and material well-being a secondary matter, he advocated what many people would consider hardship.

Since his early teenage years, he had been developing this sense of what really mattered to him. Not only would he make art, but with it he would advance into the realm he was discovering through Theosophy. He consciously sought a balance impossible in life where material well-being was the goal. Now, for the first time, he preached his beliefs, advising other guests at Maris's to take the same course.

Unlike his father, however, Mondrian was not a moralist. His sense of enjoyment was very much his own, his idea of human well-being nothing like most people's, its basis more spiritual than material, the connection he craved more universal than individual, but he believed wholeheartedly that life itself was a form of paradise.

#

Mondrian was coming out of his shell. He spent time with other people not just at Maris's but in cafés and at concerts; he even had a selected few friends visit him in his small studio. Except for Maris, the new people were mostly younger than Mondrian was. Besides Van der Briel, the one with whom he began to spend the most time was Rinus Ritsema van Eck, twenty-years old to Mondrian's twenty-eight. When they first met, probably at Arti, Van Eck was a law student in Amsterdam. Shortly thereafter he shifted course and decided to train to be a pianist. This meant moving to Paris, in order to study with a renowned teacher, Mrs. Jaëll.[383]

Mondrian was sorry to see such an interesting young fellow move away just as they were getting to know one another, but Van Eck periodically returned to Amsterdam. He told Mondrian about the advantages of life in the French capital, and how wonderful it was to devote his life entirely to musical performance in a society that not only accepted but embraced and

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[381] Gorter, 'Mies Maris', p. 23.
[382] Gorter, 'Mies Maris', p. 23.
[383] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 203; Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 298.

supported individuals who made artistic pursuit their full-time job. Mondrian was openly thrilled by the intensity of Van Eck's engagement with piano. That sheer excitement infuses a wonderful charcoal and crayon portrait Mondrian made of his young friend. Shown in an exhibition of the Kunstliefde in Utrecht in the spring of 1900, shortly after Mondrian drew it, this large sheet contradicts Mondrian's statement that he did not represent action in his art (Fig. 13).[384] He depicts the pianist in the fury of playing, leaning forward forcibly, pressing his fingers hard on the keys as he plays a chord. The hammering of the strings is so apparent that the sketch becomes audible.

Fig. 13. Mondrian, *Crayon of Ritsema van Eck at the piano*, 1900

Mondrian has dexterously drawn most of a grand piano with the top open. Rather than reproducing the piano with the verisimilitude of traditional Dutch art, he has achieved a greater resemblance by using bold strokes. His technique brandishes the physical act of applying the charcoal to the paper. Mondrian puts his own artistic medium as bluntly on display as his friend's. His own energy is present in every swirl of the crayon, and so is his discipline, which also paralleles Van Eck's. For all their apparent frenzy, the pianist follows the notes and performs the melody—we are sure of it—and the artist encapsulates the form of the piano, the sheen of its black veneer, the glistening of light along the edge of the open top, the baroque form of the stand for the sheet music, and the interplay of white and black keys.

[384] A119 Rinus Ritsema van Eck at the Piano, 1900, Charcoal, crayon and gouache on paper, 46 x 53 cm.

Mondrian gave everything of himself when he made this drawing. It is the same total engagement that gives such force to the gouache of the crazed woman carrying eggs. The subject and the artist are both fully ignited. The art of Mondrian's colleagues is laconic by comparison. Uncle Frits's canvases looked as if their artist might have been chatting while painting them. The drawing of the young pianist and the picture of the maniacal farm woman have fever-pitch intensity. The animation of Van Eck's hands, the focus with which he surveys the keys, the force with which he hunches his shoulders and sits as if ready to sprint, betray the hundred percent concentration and love for the act of creation.

#

Figurative or abstract, young or old, Mondrian always had this streamlined intensity, this instinctive ability to summon everything within himself, to reach the outside limits of full engagement. In the sketch of Van Eck, Mondrian has used the contrasting colors of the keyboard for subtle artistic effects of the sort that would, in the coming years, constitute his enchanted territory. The luminous band of the white keys, encapsulated with a bold diagonal, is echoed in a streak of sunlight along the edge of the wood behind them. The black line of the sharps and flats is, similarly, paralleled above.

No wonder that this drawing attracted a favorable review in *Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad*. It was singled out as 'stronger and more interesting' than other work in the show. The critic credits its 'firm outlines' as being 'powerfully established.'[385]

The anonymous writer, however, qualifies that praise by declaring the drawing influenced by the artist Haverman. H.J. Haverman is not a name that comes up anywhere else in the literature on Mondrian, but one can see why the critic in 1900 made the link. Not only was he a good draftsman, but he drew with Calvinistic zeal, and had the assured and determined hand of someone possessed by profound faith. Mondrian surely knew Haverman's work, and in all likelihood responded to its feeling of being done by someone possessed.

Ritsema van Eck would eventually give up piano and become a doctor. It would be great to know more about his and Mondrian's friendship. Nearly twenty years after Mondrian made this drawing, Van Eck would stay with the painter in Paris. He eventually moved to southern France, and on at least two occasions after that Mondrian, believing he could not make a go of it as a painter, considered moving down there to take a job his doctor friend offered to find for him doing agricultural work.[386] Van Eck, like Van den

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[385] Tertius, "Utrechtsch Provinciaal en Stedelijk Dagblad," April 14, 1900, in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 203.

[386] 'Maar je begrijpt als ik eenmaal de overtuiging krijg dat het nooit financieel houdbaar wordt door N.P. werk, dat ik er dan uit schei. Dan maar olijven plukken in het Zuiden. Ik kan daar 12 fr. per dag verdienen en daar leven de lui

Briel, had no direct connection to the art world. Their being in different fields abetted the friendship; there was no reason to disagree or compete. Mondrian preferred these relationships where he and the other person might admire and respect one another, but had entirely different goals in life. They provided camaraderie without imposing an intimacy or parallelity he assiduously avoided.

XXIII

Twenty-eight-year-old Mondrian had thick black hair that gave him a Byronic quality. His large eyes, their pupils also black, the irises a dark grey, met you with furious intensity. With his bold nose, and carefully trimmed mustache and beard, he resembled a Roman warrior. But he was the sort of soldier who enjoyed playing around as well as preparing for battle. Other people Mondrian's age might enjoy their high jinks, but he had neither the time nor the inclination for frivolity. His choice in theater was, after all, Ibsen, not one of the French musical reviews that also could be seen in Amsterdam; the dark Nordic seriousness suited him. He had given himself the task of making drawings and paintings in which the miracles of Creation were manifest, and was learning more about Theosophy and other forms of spiritualism. His goals of understanding the universal and evoking it in art ruled his life.

To what extent Mondrian enjoyed himself on the side is harder to know. He was an attractive, unmarried man. One of the ladies for whom Mondrian was a guide to the cultured life, the English woman for whom he made the bookplate—Hannah Crabb—invited him to Cornwall, and he accepted and went, but their relationship is a mystery. All that we know for sure about his trip to the southwest coast of England is that he went swimming in the sea.[387] Mondrian would claim, lifelong, that this was the cause of a serious bout of pneumonia that forced him to recuperate in Winterswijk later that summer and that periodically plagued him for the rest of his life.[388] But that is the sole certain fact; it was not easy to get to a remote region of England from Amsterdam in 1900, and this was Mondrian's first trip out of the Netherlands, but we have no information on whether he detoured to

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van.', letter Piet Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, February 7 1922, RKD #0613, inv.nr. 26; ''t Zal me toch wel niet mogelijk zijn om door te zetten. Ik zie nu met die kou hoeveel geld er noodig is. En geen enkele artist verkoopt meer. Alle goede artisten gaan terug: water in de wijn doen. Ik schei er liever uit. De gelegenheid in tuinbouw een bestaan te vinden biedt mijn vriend van Eck me, op zijn boerderij in 't Zuiden. Ik denk in Januari daar heen te gaan.', letter Piet Mondrian to J.J.P. Oud, December 6 1921, RKD #0613, inv.nr. 63.

[387] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 51.

[388] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, January 20, 1946, RKD #0150, inv.nr. 133.

London en route to or from Cornwall, how long he was abroad for, or whether he and Hannah Crabb, who was eleven years older than Mondrian, had a romance.

One very odd memento, however, augments our impressions of Mondrian in 1900. That year, he made a self-portrait.[389] A few years after he painted it, Mondrian and the youngest brother of Albert van den Briel, a cadet at a military academy, keen about modern automatic weapons, was doing some pistol shooting with Mondrian in the basement of the building where Mondrian lived in Amsterdam. They generally used Mondrian's discarded canvases, all of them failed portraits, as targets. The two men started firing. 'Piet was a good shot; his hand was steady,' Van den Briel tells us. 'When all the portraits had been used, there was only that self-portrait left, and Piet wanted to shoot it too.'[390] He was determined to obliterate the canvas by riddling it with pistol bullets. Van den Briel's brother objected, however. He told Mondrian that Van den Briel would be upset. 'Besides, they were running out of ammunition.' Mondrian then gave the painting to the brother to give to Van den Briel, saying 'that it was an insignificant thing, made only to solve a technical problem—that of making the sitter's eyes always meet the spectator's.'[391]

There was more to it, however. The painting is inscribed, very neatly with India ink, in block letters, all upper case, in two carefully ruled lines at the lower left. The Dutch translates as 'Thus do I dare to bring myself before the world – and calmly stand in wait –for the eternally pursuing destiny forces my desire to a state of certainty.'[392] But it was not Mondrian himself who wrote the words.

Albert van den Briel would eventually confess to Michel Seuphor that it was he who added the text some six years after acquiring the painting. It is a translation from a poem in Icelandic, possibly from one of the early sagas. In a letter to Michel Seuphor, Van den Briel explained to Seuphor, "'The text is certainly dramatic and exaggerated. But Piet himself had not gone beyond that stage.'"[393]

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What is meant by 'that stage'? Is there anything really to learn from this statement that Michel Seuphor, in French, quoted from what Albert van den Briel said to him in Dutch about words initially uttered in Icelandic? Knowing the inscription was not written by the artist himself, but by an intrusive friend who wrote on Mondrian's self-portrait years after the painting was made?

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[389] A137 Self-Portrait, c.1900, Oil on canvas mounted on masonite, 55 x 39 cm, The Phillips Collection Washington.
[390] Van den Briel about Mondrian, as quoted in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 178.
[391] Van den Briel about Mondrian, as quoted in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 178.
[392] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 210.
[393] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 63.

Van den Briel claimed, or at least Seuphor claimed that Van den Briel claimed, that Mondrian detested this painting he wanted to shoot.[394] Mondrian, according to Van den Briel, had made this painting of his own face only to master the painting of eyes so that they face and engage the viewer. Yet look at the painting. Those eyes do not meet ours. They avoid a direct encounter; they are rolled upwards. The facial hair further conceals Mondrian's feelings. He is intense, concentrated, and thoughtful—as well as sturdy and manly and handsome—but he keeps his distance, revealing little.

This self-portrait is, in fact, one of Mondrian's best-painted works of the period. No wonder that Duncan Phillips, a knowing collector with an astute eye, eventually bought it. When we see it today at the Phillips Collection in Washington, one of the most sympathetic places in the world to look at art works, when we meet this self-portrait, it gives us the sense that we see the twenty-eight-year-old artist as he really was—both his real and physical appearance and his deliberate elusiveness.

Fig. 14. Mondrian, *Spring Idyll*, 1900-1901

Mondrian has artfully deployed bright highlights within the overall dark palette of the picture. The glistening white of those large, obfuscating eyes; the streak of light down the main line of cartilage in the strong nose; the brightness of a white shirt where it appears from behind a dark vest: all snap with life. This painting has much more force and power than works like *On the Lappenbrink* or the truly ghastly *Spring Idyll* of the same year (Fig. 14), a sugary-sweet image of two wide-eyed young girls, arm in arm, in a flower

[394] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 63.

garden. [395] Mondrian painted the blond hair and pudgy faces and pouting lips of those girls as if he was, mentally, a million miles away from his subject. Making their portrait, he resembled someone with a bass voice trying to sing as a tenor or a soprano. It is as if he was trying to paint a confection like one of Renoir's, which is to say he was presenting himself as something he was not. The painting feels painfully inauthentic. On the other hand, in the self-portrait, by being concealing, by putting up a bold front, by giving force even to his shock of thick hair, Mondrian, deliberately mysterious, seems very real. He had something to hide, and he did so with immense skill and determination.

#

To keep part of one's self clandestine holds others in thrall. Elusiveness can give a person great power. Patently knowing more than he reveals, Mondrian presents himself as a seer.

He had become obsessed with the book *The Great Initiates*, by Édouard Schuré.[396] He read it in French—it would not be published in Dutch until 1909—which was no mean feat. But the premise of the book fascinated Mondrian. It presents major changes in human civilization as being the result of brave, groundbreaking thinking on the part of a few brilliant individuals.

Schuré, born in 1841, was a friend of both Richard Wagner—whom he had managed to meet because of his love for *Tristan and Isolde*, and Friedrich Nietzsche, another Wagner fan. In 1884, Schuré had met Helena Blavatsky, and in 1889 had published *The Great Initiates: A study of the Secret History of Religions*, a book about various individuals in human history who had sought esoteric wisdom and in their search become "initiates"—mystics capable of spiritual healing. Schuré's central figures—the druid Rama, Krishna, Hermes, Socrates, Plato, Orpheus and Jesus, among them—have in common that they all tried to present discoveries beneficial to all human civilization, but were attacked and vilified. They exemplify the idea that one cannot be a prophet in one's own time.

Schuré's book opens with two quotations: 'The soul is the key to the universe' and 'I am convinced that the day will come when psychologists, poets and philosophers will speak the same language and will understand one another.'[397] Mondrian wholeheartedly embraced both ideas, and was prepared to be a martyr for them as the Initiates were. In the 1900 self-portrait, he could well be any of Schuré's "initiated" who could perceive

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[395] A64 Lente Idylle, 1900-1901, Oil on canvas, 75 x 64 cm, private collection.
[396] 'I am now thinking of a book by a certain Ed. Schuré: "Les grands Initiés", which I read long ago and which is beautifully written', letter Mondrian to Van den Briel, no date [late 1920's], as quoted in: Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian. The Art of Destruction*, Reaktion Books, London 2001, p. 246.
[397] Édouard Schuré, *The Great Initiates*, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco 1961, page 3.

universal truth. His gaze is not unlike those of the woman in the central panel of a triptych, *Evolution*, which he would paint nearly a decade later. Eyes wide open, looking straight ahead, with a disproportionately large head, frontal and blocky in the style of Cézanne, the image Mondrian has created of himself is of someone in a trance.

The hollow-cheeked, pale, bearded fellow looking upwards also defines the word "sallow." Other-worldly, off in his own territory, he is more haunted than healthy. He saw and represented himself as being possessed by forces outside himself.

XXIV

Mondrian and Simon Maris and another painter friend, Arnold M. Gorter, began to make regular outings together to paint at the side of the Gein River. The café De Vink, at the river's edge, served as their home base.[398] The De Vink gave them a place to have a coffee or beer and, most importantly on those day-trips from Amsterdam, use the toilet. Mondrian preferred to paint in the bucolic countryside than the city center, and enjoyed being with friends, so the group outings suited him perfectly. He painted less traditionally than the others, lavishing unexpected colors and distorting his subject matter according to some inner drive the others found incomprehensible, but they shared a wish to paint and be outside, and delighted in one another company on the bicycle journeys and respites at the café.

Fig. 15. Mondrian, *House on the Gein 1741*, 1900

[398] See: Gorter, 'Mies Maris', p. 33.

Toward the end of 1900, the Association for the Promotion of the Visual Arts bought Mondrian's watercolor *House on the Gein* (Fig. 15) out of an exhibition at Arti et Amicitae. [399] They chose astutely. Watercolor is an unforgiving medium, and Mondrian had worked the eighteen by twenty-two inch sheet adeptly. He had given himself a tough task: the gable ends of a farmhouse, its extension, and adjacent sheds and out-buildings, and, then—the greater challenge—the reflections of all of them in the river. Not only did he articulate the complex subject meticulously, but he endowed it with poetic grace by roughly separating the horizontal scene into two halves, with the top edge of the river bank as their dividing line, so that the structures and their reflections make a well-balanced whole, the positive and negative in serene equilibrium. The sky and roof tops echoed in the water are beguiling. Mondrian composed them above and below in similarly hued powdery blues and harmonious brownish tans interspersed with dashes of white, while differentiating the actual subjects and their reflections by a shift in the light intensity. He accentuates the triangular peak of the large gable of the main house so that it just about reaches the top of the sheet, and its mirror image, a triangle pointing downwards, touches the bottom, creating a diamond which occupies most of the painting. That diamond shape is jaunty and upbeat. Although unconsciously, it presages some of the greatest abstractions Mondrian would do in his maturity, the ones where the canvas is rotated forty-five degrees so that it has sloping sides, with its corners as the top and bottom points. Form itself—a handsome shape—becomes, like color, an immense source of pleasure.

Painting with panache, being appreciated, Mondrian was gaining self-confidence. Simon Maris's large coterie recognized him as a painter in a league of his own.

His new friends—especially Rinus Ritsema van Eck and Albert van den Briel—were devoted to him.

But he was, in some essential way, far from satisfied. Mondrian felt that something in his life was amiss, and he sought a path for change. He put his hopes in the tenets of Theosophy. Mondrian started spending more time with its adherents and reading its literature voraciously. He attented Simon Maris's weekly salons, but stood off to the side, lecturing anyone who would listen about the connection of art and spiritualism he was exploring in new depth with the Theosophical Society. With his stern good looks and fine physique, some of the female guests would have preferred it if Mondrian flirted, instead of holding forth, but the only seduction that interested him was intellectual.

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[399] A246 *House on the Gein*, 1741, Watercolor, 1900, watercolor and gouache on paper, 46 x 57 cm. Purchased by the Vereeniging tot Bevordering van de Beeldende Kunsten at an informal drawing exhibition at Arti. According to custom is sold by lottery at the Arti building. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 121.

For now, Mondrian had everything under control. This would be true until the end of 1903—when a personal crisis would cause him, at the age of thirty-one, to move far from Amsterdam into virtual isolation from everyone except for Van den Briel. Even there, his privacy would be violated, the armor shattered. But at least for the time being, he was in balance.

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That he was different from other people was as accepted by his social set as it had been by his siblings and parents. It was expected for Mondrian to live with his personal life private, and to make paintings that were outside the norm. The fellow painters with whom he went to the De Vink counted on him to be original and imaginative, to treat their shared subject matter in his own way, less academic than theirs. But sometimes he painted something far from *his* norm—the way that *On the Lappenbrink* and *Spring Idyll* were. On these occasions, he abandoned his usual emotional and aesthetic control. Throwing caution to the winds, he let out an incomprehensible yelp.

This occurred again when at the end of 1900 and the start of 1901 he painted *Young Child,* also called *Girl with Flowers.*[400] With her overly wide eyes, their blue orbs glistening in the light, her portrait conjures work by the monsters of American kitsch, the Keenes. Some driving force, strong enough to obliterate his normal good judgment, periodically possessed Mondrian to paint this sort of thing.

He painted this travesty—while I realize you may find my judgment harsh, I cannot see this painting as anything but a lapse which is fascinating in its ridiculousness—at a time when he was mostly producing resoundingly calm paintings of the local farms and industrial buildings along the river. Mondrian has, in this picture of a girl, suddenly succumbed to a strident sentimentality. He was prompted by his growing mysticism, and the value it placed on the appearance of innocence, but the result rings false.

The strange painting, however, takes us inside Mondrian's mind when he was in his late twenties. It encapsulates his ideal of goodness. Unusual for a man his age, he was obsessed with the quality of virginal purity.

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Mondrian's *Young Girl*, like his portrait of Hendrik van de Velde as a cherub, is meant to represent absolute goodness. The insane woman with the eggs in *On the Lappenbrink* appears to be nuts because she lacks that virtue, but this wide-eyed girl is in the innocent and beatific state that eluded the poor creature in her kerchief. Purity obsessed Mondrian, which is why he had painted its lack, and now evoked it in an image which could be on a greeting card. Why would a man approaching the age of thirty need to imagine this innocence too good to be true, so patently false?

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[400] A138 *Kindje (Young Child)*, 1900-01, Oil on canvas, 53 x 44 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

The significance of *Young Child* was elucidated by a young critic named Henriëtte Hendrix, a woman who Mondrian already had encountered at Simons Maris's Saturday afternoons.[401] Thanks to personal conversations, Miss. Hendrix knew where the artist's heart lay.

In *De Telegraaf* of June 8, 1901, she writes that the painting is a step beyond a portrait of a girl from the previous year, and that it is 'more developed, more clearly saying what he actually intends.'[402] She praises Mondrian's portrait of the girl with bulging eyes as 'an attempt to represent the inner nature of the very young, very pure life of a child […] This little head is not quite real, much more like an idea.' Hendrix considers 'the wide open large blue eyes' as symbolic of a lack of consciousness 'of a cruel world.' She notes the powerful, radiant light in which Mondrian painted this embodiment of innocence with her flowing tresses and puffy blouse, and credits that light with making her head all the more 'ethereal.' [403] Weightlessness, the absence of cruelty, a state of purity, the representation of an idea more than reality: these same qualities would pertain to Mondrian's most sophisticated abstractions decades later. That she saw Mondrian's portrait of a child as emblematic of the absence of cruelty reflects a rare ability to recognize the essence of an art work. Hendrix presents this oil of a puffy-cheeked girl as the exemplar of the true spirit of its maker: 'I find this "Young Child" a thing a noble sentiment […] to be viewed when one needs courage in the face of a little weariness.'[404]

An anonymous critic for the *Provinciaalsche Groninger Courant*, appreciated, similarly, that such works are 'less portraits than ideas.' What counts is 'expression […] less real but rather symbolic […] In his "Young Child" Mondrian has to some extend produced abstraction.'[405]

However saccharine in its representation here, the innocence, the unblemished beatitude, manifest in this painting and observed by critics steeped in the same religious and political movements as Mondrian, are the same values Mondrian would eventually realize far more effectively in his abstract compositions. With black lines, precise rectangles of primary color, and expanses of whiteness, he would, twenty years later, achieve his utopia with infinitely greater success by inventing a new language to express it.

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[401] Gorter, 'Mies Maris', p. 25-26. Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 273.
[402] H.H. [Henriëtte Hendrix], 'St.Lucas-tentoonstelling', in: *De Telegraaf*, June 8, 1901, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 211. Welsh identified this 'H.H' incorrectly with Henriette Roland Holst. I kindly thank Peter de Ruiter for correcting my wrong assumption.
[403] H.H., 'St.Lucas-tentoonstelling, in: *De Telegraaf*, June 8, 1901, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 211.
[404] H.H., 'St.-Lucas-tentoonstelling', in: *De Telegraaf*, June 8, 1901, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 211.
[405] "anon.", *Provinciaalsche Groninger Courant*, June 15, 1900, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 211.

The cloying subject matter—not just the girl's enormous eyes and puffy pink cheeks, but the perfect white anemones festooned along the bottom of the canvas, each opened directly toward us—represent the untroubled purity that would be Mondrian's ideal lifelong. Her artifice was preferable for him than the secrets of his own life. He was more comfortable with her implausible sweetness than with his own sexuality, his true emotions.

I am not being judgmental. The older I get, the less I think life is a court of law. Much as I dislike the painting, I find it understandable that Mondrian created an image of earthly perfection that is intrinsically artificial, even false, because it was his only refuge for some truth within himself that he could not stand. He was, at heart, a Calvinist. He could not cope with desires outside of the rule book. He developed, in lieu of reality, a notion of earthly perfection.

His late compositions would be sylvan glades. What Mondrian was craving as a young man was a refuge from life's problems and vicissitudes, an ideal territory that does not reflect what for him were the discomfiting sides of human existence but that provides, like music, an uplifting and flawless world of its own.

Yet, at the same time, in all that goodness, there is a denial of what is natural, a masking of the Balthus sides of human beings, of the incredible force of sexual desire and the link of eroticism and power. Desperately needing to replace what he found unacceptable in himself with a vision of virtue, Mondrian lost his usual artistic strength. In *Young Child*, his alternative to his own truths was cloying. In little time, his solutions to his need for art that provides an alternative to reality would be masterful, but for now he was visibly struggling to substitute truth with a saccharine alternative. The painting has a look of falseness, and the choice of colors and the application of paint are weak. The technique and aesthetic sensibility belong to an artist who does not at the moment know who he is, or is deliberately covering up his real self.

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On June 1, 1901, shortly after he finished this portrait of a girl who feigns to imagine only good things in a trouble-free world, Mondrian passed the entrance exam for the Prix de Rome competition.[406] He was one of four young artists to have done so, and was optimistic that this time he would win the award whereby the Dutch government would pay for him to study art in Italy for two years and provide him with a generous stipend to live and paint back in the Netherlands for two further years afterwards.

The preliminary exam had required 'thorough knowledge of art theory, aesthetics, history of art, anatomy and perspective.'[407] Mondrian's grades in that first hurdle were a five (out of five) in aesthetics, a four in art history, another four in 'objects within perspective.' But yet again he had a problem

[406] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 121.
[407] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 170.

with anatomy. He garnered only a "three." Three out of five, or 60%, is, by most grading standards, as low a mark as one can get without totally failing.

Mondrian was palbably not at ease with the human skeleton and musculature. He appeared not to know the forms of men's and women's bodies very well.

His inability to articulate them, whereas he could draw intricate flower blossoms faultlessly, suggests that he had not observed them sufficiently firsthand. Studying a naked model, of either gender, on a platform in the studio was insufficient; whether it was for lack of knowledge or because of some inhibiting factor, the replication of a naked human being stymied him. The Rome prize was to take him to the place where competent rendering of males and females, clothed and naked, was considered essential to the making of sculpture and painting. It was not small matter that he was so poor at drawing human figures.

And he was so naive that he did not expect that deficiency to impede him. Mondrian had succeeded at the hardest stage of the acceptance process, and although he had not reached that same point in 1898, he felt that his technical skills had advanced sufficiently for him now to do a better job of drawing people, and to win the prize he coveted.

He knew that this was his last chance. Thirty was the oldest permissible age for candidates for the award given at three-year intervals, and he was now twenty-nine. Determined to land this prize that would allow him to make art in a new setting—liberated from the stiffling need to seek and take commissions, give art lessons, and copy masterpieces to survive while painting as he wanted in the remaining hours of the day—he was optimistic that if he stuck with the acceptance process, he would be heading to Italy.

From June 17 to July 3, Mondrian and the three other candidates convened for the execution phase that followed the written part of the competition. They were given the two weeks to paint two religious scenes and a male nude, 100 x 60 cm. Of the four artists, Mondrian was the only who failed to survive that stage of the process. The judges, all academicians, observed of his rendering of a naked man from behind: 'The study of a nude model does not respond to reasonable expectations, since in neither form nor color is a relationship maintained with nature.' They specifically criticized the 'compact but pithy forms' and the 'shapeless clumsiness and obtuseness of line. The legs are much too thick and display very little pertinent anatomical understanding. […] The dull gray color and for the most part insipid modeling make no favorable impression. Only the upper part of the trunk of the body suffers less from the above-mentioned ills.'[408]

It was not only a rejection, but a diatribe. Was the man who had three brothers and had lived, during his first three years in Amsterdam, with two

[408] Translation of comments by the judges of the competition for the Dutch Prix de Rome taken June 17, 1901, with results presented to the jury at a meeting of July 3, in: Welsh, *CR* I, p. 206.

men his own age, truly so unaware of the form of the male body? How could someone with the consummate skill to articulate the complex form of a chrysanthemum lack the wherewithal to paint a naked man? It seems that the subject made him excruciatingly uncomfortable, that his capability was completely blocked when he faced a naked man.

The judges also disdained Mondrian's two religious scenes, although not as vehemently. For the written file, they wrote, 'Elisha with the widow's son' attests to neither good taste nor soundness of principle. The dramatic treatment of the figure and the setting […] is not pleasing […]. Also the illumination […] is quite false.' They were no more impressed by the second scene: 'The composition of Jacob with Joseph's coat is equally unconvincing of the maker's talent for composition. […] Also the arrangement into groups is dull and unimaginative.'[409] While two of the three remaining candidates made it through the rest of the process and received the four-year grants, Mondrian was left with nothing from the grueling exams except for the sting of the judges' critique.[410]

Whereas, in his life as a well-known abstract artist in Paris, London, and New York, Mondrian would often show people his two certificates from the Dutch teaching establishment allowing him to teach, he destroyed the paperwork concerning the Prix de Rome. The details of his rejection are known only because they remained in the officials' files, where the scholar Robert Welsh sussed them out over sixty years after the fact.[411]

Mondrian invariably cast aside whatever troubled him in life. The documentation of his failure went into the waste bin. And when the issue was flesh and blood, he was so stymied that he did not even realize to what extent he blocked it out.

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[409] From the jury's report, as translated in: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 170.

[410] None of the judges could have imagined that they had refused one of the future modernist icons and the most important Dutch painter of the twentieth century. In those days, the Prix de Rome was not intended for discovering new, young talent. But the jury's criterion were difficult to discuss. Greatly appreciated painters like Breitner and Gestel applied for the prize and travel grant but withdrew. Of the painters who actually won the price, most have been forgotten, with the exception of Jan Sluijters, who won the Prix de Rome in 1904. Marguerite Tuijn [ed.], *Prix de Rome MDCCCVIII – MMVIII*, Nieuw Amsterdam, Amsterdam 2008, p. 76.

[411] Welsh found these judgments during his research for his dissertation in the early 1960's. The thesis was originally presented at Princeton University, May 1, 1965 and reprinted by Garland Publishing in 1977, see: Welsh, *Early Career*, p. 10; p. 179.

XXV

His hopes for financial security dashed, Mondrian had to find a new means to support himself if he had a prayer of making a go of it as a painter. What he earned from giving private instruction and an occasional portrait commission, was not enough to make ends meet. He decided to try to emulate Uncle Frits's success at selling scenes of the countryside. And so, in the aftermath of his Prix de Rome rejection, Mondrian rapidly produced more landscapes, for which the newly affluent Dutch public had a perpetual demand.

These light and sketchy paintings from 1901-1902, intended to grace bourgeois interiors, are perfectly agreeable. But they are a bit lackluster, absent the flare of what Mondrain had painted a few years earlier when he was in a phase of discovery.

He entered a period of retrenchment. Mondrian resembled his father by retreating after having put himself on the line and had his hopes squelched, although he never would have acknowledged to Pieter Mondriaan that similarity.

His life was as humdrum as his art. If Mondrian had some burning passion, it was not there for most other people to see. When Mondrian wanted company, he repaired to Simon Maris's, but there he was more on the sidelines than in the center of things. Otherwise he enjoyed the company of his young admirer Albert van den Briel, with whom he reflected on religion and social issues more than on art. If he had any passionate personal relationships, he did not leave a trace of them.

Mondrian remained on the fringes of the various social and religious groups into which Dutch society was broken up, but he was never deeply engaged. He was still on the register of the Amsterdam church which was closest to his father's way of thinking, but was on equally friendly terms with the other Calvinist factions since he depended on all of them for artistic commissions. There were sharply differentiated economic stratum in Amsterdam— with its burgeoning business world meaning that large group of people were enjoying an unprecedented level of financial well-being, there was, as is inevitable when the rich gets richer, a large segment of the population, already living in substantial and hard conditions, getting poorer—and while Mondrian needed to get along with the wealthy and successful members of Amsterdam's industrial and professional communities who could afford to be his patrons, he also was making friends with struggling working class people active in the labor movement. It would be great to know more. Because if Mondrian had much of sex life, it was probably there.

Fig. 16. Mondrian, *Gedenkplaat ter gelegenheid van Het huwelijk van Koningin Wilhelmina*, 1901

Meanwhile, his affinity for anarchists and political radicals did not prevent him from being a bit of a royalist. The majority of Dutch people were loyal to the monarchy, and, in spite of having made many life decisions different from his fellow countrymen, Mondrian was no exception.[412] For the marriage of Queen Wilhelmina in February of 1901, he made a large design for a commemorative lithograph (Fig. 16).[413] The previous December, he had already demonstrated his fealty to the monarch by giving her a watercolor of a single chrysanthemum that was part of a collective wedding present for her from Arti et Amicitiae. Now he went further in his devotion. Using a regal style rather than his own voice, he created a behemoth nearly a meter high. The lithograph honoring the Queen's marriage has ornate outline lettering in quintessential Jugendstil, and is blanketed with ornate decoration, royal crests, and stylized figures symbolizing the creative arts. Its focal point is an unidentified deity

[412] See Frans Groot, 'Vlaggen in top en stenen door de ruiten. De natie in de steigers, 1850-1940', in: J.C.H. Blom & J. Talsma, *De verzuiling voorbij. Godsdienst, stand en natie in de lange negentiende eeuw*, Het Spinhuis, Amsterdam 2000, p. 185-187. Especially the orthodox-protestants had a special bond with the Royal Family: 'Het koningshuis ontleende zijn gezag niet aan volk en parlement, maar aan God. Deze primair godsdienstige, protestantse benadering […] bracht de antirevolutionairen op de gedachte dat ze een natuurlijker verhouding hadden tot het koningschap.'

[413] A134 Gedenkplaat ter gelegenheid van het huwelijk van Koningin Wilhelmina, 1901, pen and collage on paper, 74 x 54 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

surrounded by a wingspread of feathers. Having drawn all off these by hand, Mondrian then affixed photos of Her Majesty and His Highness in the midst of this pompous panoply. The rectitude and importance of the royal couple shone.

Pieter Mondriaan also made a lithograph in honor of the royal marriage. The one by the son was very much in his father's style, brimming with patriotism, but Piet's was exceptionally emotional—more than his father's and more than any other work he made in this glum period following the second Prix de Rome defeat. Mondrian appears completely possessed by a fervent devotion to the House of Orange, consumed by a greater intensity than in any other work at the time.

Or else it was a guise. Pouring emotion into a maquette to be reproduced and distributed as 'a presumably limited number of lithograps' to celebrate a royal marriage, Mondrian was possibly enacting a costume play.[414] His authentic self was safely hidden.

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In the spring of 1901, Pieter Mondriaan retired from full-time teaching. The state pension was insufficient, however, and he needed further income. He began to give private instruction in Arnhem, a city near the German border. Arnhem was more prosperous than Winterswijk, and the schoolmaster could find students there whose families were able to pay his fees, and so he and Mondrian's mother moved there. Johanna, Mondrian's older sister, had never left home, and his youngest brother, Carel, was still in school, so they accompanied their parents.[415]

Winterswijk became a thing of the past. It had been Mondrian's home for over twenty years. He had had his first studio there, and had made local sights and some of the people in town, like the woman on the Lappenbrink with her basket of eggs, the subject matter of much of his art, even of paintings he completed in Amsterdam. On top of the Prix de Rome crisis, the loss of his home base was destabilizing. To have his place of retreat and familiarity taken away from him just when his hope for the new was shattered, was painful.

In Amsterdam, Mondrian was not on sure ground. Artistic standards were dictated by the power structure of the Dutch Academy. Even if he showed obeisance to the Queen, and could conjure a full-blown academic style if he had to, Mondrian lacked sufficient skill with the human figure to rise in the ranks; besides, he had no wish to work in the old-fashioned way.

This would be one of many occasions when Mondrian had the rug being pulled out from underneath him. Even if he was briefly bothered, he responded with exceptional resilience—as he always would to obstacles and set-backs in life. He not only survived; he invariably turned these changes in

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[414] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 209.
[415] Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 29.

his circumstances into an opportunity. When one door closed, he set his sights on a new horizon.

XXVI

On July 25, 1901, Mondrian went to the wedding of one of his Amsterdam friends, Lucas Barend Lindeboom.[416] For the past couple of years, Lindeboom, a dentist, had been acquiring paintings by Mondrian. The parents of the bride, Margaretha Petronella Harrenstein, were also art collectors who had been buying Mondrian's small canvases almost as soon as he produced them. Between them, Lindeboom and the senior Harrensteins owned half a dozen of his paintings. They and other successful professionals had become the backbone of Mondrian's life.[417]

During the celebration following the ceremony, Mondrian met the bride's younger sister. Twenty-three-year-old Diderieke Petronella Harrenstein, known as Nell, wanted to become a painter. Already in high spirits at her sister's wedding, she fell head over heals for the lean, bearded Mondrian. Because of the paintings her parents and the bridegroom owned, she knew even before she actually met him that he was a gifted artist. In person, he was slightly awkward, not as outgoing or amusing as the other young men at the party, but she was predisposed to like him because of her fondness for the warm spirit evident in his art. His intensity and seriousness at a wedding party where others were letting loose suited her image of a talented young artist. Mondrian's purposefulness and belief in himself were to Nell's taste, and, recognizing his rough edges, she hoped to see more of him and make him more at ease in the world.

The relationship that began over beer and herring at the wedding reception continued. In the days that followed, Nell and Mondrian often met to take long walks together. Ambling through farmland near Amsterdam, they would discuss concepts of beauty, Plato's in particular. At least so it was reported over sixty years later; at the time the walks were secret. But in 1963, Nell's daughter, Mrs. W.H. Luyten, wrote Robert Welsh about her mother's and Mondrian's romance, which is why it is known about today.[418]

The young woman who wanted to be an artist and the twenty-nine-year-old Mondrian were so attracted to one another that they would have liked to marry. That, anyway, is what is always said, along with the information that they knew without question that they could not even consider the

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[416] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 26. Mondrian gave a still-life with oranges (A97) as a marriage present to the couple Lindeboom-Harrenstein. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 196.
[417] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 121.
[418] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 121 and p. 133 (note 25).

possibility. Mondrian did not have a steady and reliable income. The Harrensteins are described as being like many other people of a certain milieu who thought it was fine for a man to devote his life to making art, but deemed such a man unacceptable to marry their daughter. They admired Mondrian's work enough to acquire it, but by no means did his skill qualify him as a son-in-law.

Nell was unwilling to challenge them. She and Mondrian enjoyed 'a deep friendship, based in part upon a common antipathy to the restrictions of conventional bourgeois society at the time,'[419] but she would not go so far as to violate those restrictions even if she shunned them. Mondrian's first serious romance came to a rapid halt.

Any of us who have grown up on stories of forbidden marriages and love affairs stopped by parents knows that there is usually at least one other version of history. In the case of Mondrian and Nell Harrenstein, the explanation of their 'impossible' but ardent relationship is dubious. Welsh's report has become the gospel, but, if we think about it, Mondrian was socially acceptable, and he was moderately successful, as the people who spent their money for his paintings knew better than anyone else. And Nell was sufficiently counter-cultured for her parents potentially to have been happy that she had found a decent man who suited her. Something else was wrong.

XXVII

By the start of 1902, Mondrian was at a crisis point. The failed relationship with Nell, whatever the reasons for its abrupt halt, deflated his spirits. The Prix de Rome jurors' judgment of his ineptitude had already put a halt to his painting and drawing men; now, he ceased making images of women and girls as well. On rare occasions he would accept a commission to paint a portrait, but otherwise he was, for the time being, off of people; he felt he could survive on the sale of his scenes of riverbanks and farmyards, and they were all he now wanted to paint.

When group photos were taken at Simon Maris's weekly gatherings, Mondrian positioned himself as the outsider in the company of members of the two art societies, as well writers and musicians, he kept himself apart. A picture shot in Maris's studio shows four men alongside six women in hats and dresses with puffed sleeves; Mondrian is the only male who is not up on his feet. The other men stand jaunty and confident, while the seated Mondrian, practically hidden from view by one of the women, peers out awkwardly. In a photo taken at Maris's home at Keizersgracht 498, he is even more the odd man out. Mondrian is with five prosperous and well-dressed people who look as if they are having a good time together. He has more

[419] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 121.

space around him than anyone else does, is in joyless clothes, and has none of their ebullience. As usual, whether in his self-portraits or photographs, even though he faces us, he does not look at us. He gazes sideways, and, compared to his merry comrades, appears the observer more than the participant. His hint of a smile suggests that he is slightly amused by the social gathering, but not really participating in it—detached in attitude as well as his physical position.

By May 6, 1903, he was registered as again living with his brothers at Ringdijk 81 in Watergraafsmeer.[420] Mondrian benefited by the move back there because it qualified him as a non-resident for his Arti membership, meaning he paid less, but he needed to cut other expenses as well now that he had renounced portrait commissions.[421]

Economic necessity, however, was not the only reason for this retreat to the security of being with Louis and Carel, who was now done with school and also had left the nest. For all their limitations, his brothers were familiar and trustworthy. Mondrian needed the stability of living with Louis and Carel, different though they were from him, as well as a location away from the center of the city, because he had gotten into a troublesome situation with some Amsterdam acquaintances. The relationships were making him intensely uncomfortable. That retreat to his siblings was his immediate solution, but even then, he was not out of the line of fire.

By July, Mondrian would decide that he had to get even further away. The issues were extreme; he could no longer paint. The only solution would be to pack up and leave Amsterdam forever.

XXVIII

By the time Mondrian had escaped to his brothers that spring, harboring himself in the suburb for reasons no one else knew, Albert van den Briel had left Amsterdam and gone to Brabant, a thinly populated region of farm country and small villages in southern Netherlands. In Amsterdam, Van den Briel had been studying medicine because anthropology, his real interest, did not yet exist as an academic discipline. After taking courses in biology, evolution, and 'monkey science,' he became convinced that his eyes needed a rest from too much time looking through a microscope. He felt so overworked and frail that he consulted a doctor, who advised him to shift his career to forestry.[422]

Van den Briel followed the doctor's advice and took a position working on reclamation projects for the *Nederlandsche Heidemaatschappij* (Dutch

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[420] Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers*, p. 48.
[421] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 122.
[422] See letter Albert van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, November 18 1964, as quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 60-61.

Moorland Company). These projects were spread across Brabant, so it required him to move there permanently. He welcomed the cure. Brabant was serene, and the local people welcomed him warmly as he embarked on a new and fascinating career.

Mondrian missed Van den Briel. His young friend was warm and accepting, and Mondrian's conversations with him more probing and intimate than with anyone else. He had come to depend on this respectful friend who was engaged neither in art or politics as he was, but who understood his passions and was open-minded to his independence and his will to make the world a better place. When Van den Briel was still in Amsterdam, the younger man simply listened supportively to however much Mondrian wanted to tell him. Now Mondrian wrote Van den Briel several urgent letters about his current situation, which had become dire.[423]

It was in June that Mondrian first reported that his problems were intensifying to the extent that he was no longer able to paint. Then he sent Van den Briel a letter that was far more upsetting than any to date, although its contents remain unknown to us except that Van den Briel, intensely worried, responded by return mail urging Mondrian to escape whatever it was that was so poisonous in Amsterdam and come visit him in Brabant right away.[424] He assured Mondrian that the trip would serve not only to remove him from his current difficulties but would give him a needed change. Van den Briel not only wanted to rescue his anguished friend but to restore his spirits and enable him to start painting again.

Albert Van den Briel had assumed a very particular role in Mondrian's life. While never actually working for Mondrian, he functioned as a sort of young assistant. He was not a friend of equal footing; rather, he worshipped the artist, and was determined to be a bastion of balance and well-being for the older man he considered a genius.

He was the first of many people who would believe that if they enabled Piet Mondrian to be a productive artist they were serving not just someone they admired but the world at large. Van den Briel insisted that the scenery in North Brabant would be soothing, and, besides calming Mondrian, would inspire him to paint again with zeal. Mondrian agreed to make the trip. He would, as a first step, head there immediately to get himself away from what felt like an emergency; once with Van den Briel, he would have a chance to reflect in safety and consider a permanent move.

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[423] Only a few letters from Mondrian to Van den Briel have survived. We know from correspondence between Van den Briel and various scholars in the 1950's and 60's that Van den Briel had received more letters than could be found after his death. Van den Briel presumably destroyed them, considering them too personal for others to see. Mondrian himself kept none of the Van den Briel's – or anyone else's – letters to him.

[424] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

What the issues were—or why Mondrian was so plagued by them that he chose to uproot himself for a year—is cloaked in mystery. Mondrian never discussed this or any other traumatic episode with anyone else, or at least with anyone who made it known. My own belief is that he did not have confidantes and that he abhorred the idea of self-revelation. Mondrian's method for dealing with calamities—whether they were personal situations that needed to end, or the two world wars that upended his life—was to move to a new location that would remove him physically from the problem. As in his later art, physical distance and isolation allowed emotional stability. Mondrian would not talk about what had gone wrong; he would simply extricate himself, and resume painting.

On rare occasions, after he had put a crisis behind him, Mondrian would teeter on analyzing it, obliquely, and certainly never in the first person, by writing about male and female traits, and about human relationships, but he would make no reference to any personal experience. He presented his views authoritatively, as if they were universal givens rather than feelings connected with his own life. But in regard to the precise circumstances that led to his leaving Amsterdam, determined to live almost as a hermit for the rest of his life, he stayed mute.

Whatever his personal issues were, in the long run, Mondrian was someone more content with essential solitude than with true closeness to any other individual. He was passionate for beauty, to an unparalleled degree, but it was distinctly not linked to any intimacy to other people. He was drawn as if by a powerful magnetic pull to a larger universal force, the wonder of life itself, the thrills of visual and audible rhythm. Solitary as he was, he was never alone, because of that connection with the totality of all of existence. Personal closeness to a single, or a few other people would have been, for him, an impediment.

Most people would say that Mondrian was unresolved on a vital level of human existence. My own belief is that he realized that, at least for himself, resolution in personal relationships—familial, sexual, whatever—is impossible, and he was blessed to find a broader connection to everyone and everything on earth. You may deem him neurotic because human relationships were so frought for him.

Having never in my life encountered anyone for whom relationships with family and lovers are not problematic, I consider it part of Mondrian's brilliance, distinctly manifest in his art, that he had no false expectations of a human concord that does not exist, and got beyond trying to achieve an unattainable myth.

XXIX

Starting in about 1900, Mondrian had befriended people whom he thought would advance "social progressive" politics that the considered integral to

Theosophy. Madame Blavatsky's swap of her first-class steamship ticket for four in steerage so that a poor family could also make the crossing was exemplary of his new beliefs. If you were going to help human civilization advance toward universal well-being, a oneness with a spiritual force that was non-sectarian and reached all people, you took action that was egalitarian as its core. For Mondrian, this meant engaging with some of Amsterdam's anarchists determined to fight against the industrial power structure and protect the workers oppressed by the greed of their increasingly rich employers.

Some of Mondrian's new friends were violent anti-capitalists as committed to their beliefs and as sure of their radicalism as his father had been about his own sect of Protestantism. Mondrian by instinct was drawn to absolute thinking, to faith that allowed no compromises. Within a few years, he would be an exemplar of that type of believer; for now, he attached himself to others with the complete commitment to their extreme theories and determination to realize them. His anarchist friends were a far cry from the fellow artists he knew in the Simon Maris circle. In a period when Mondrian was producing paintings that were geared mainly for the marketplace, which was supported exclusively by people of sufficient financial mean to buy art, he had been reading Émile Zola extensively, and becoming preoccupied by people who did not have the same economic well-being as his clients, or as painters who, if not rich, had enough to live on. His new companions could barely afford food or shelter.

Van den Briel tells us that Zola's writing echoed the ideas Mondrian had already formed on how transformation could best be realized for the benefit of society at large. Mondrian believed that humanity would improve its lot with the guidance of the right individuals (Schuré's Great Initiators.) Mondrian embraced Zola's ideal of "innéité"—the process whereby people overcome physical and moral traits of their ancestors and advance from generation to generation, surmounting hereditary weaknesses with a moral progress that results in all humanity uniting in brotherhood.[425]

In 1880, Zola had written *Nana*, which focused on ignominious sex work; in 1885, he had published *Germinal*, which portrayed brutal labor conditions in coal mines. This second novel centered on a work strike. Mondrian, obsessed with the poverty and squalor in Amsterdam's worst slums, embraced the human capacity to combat oppression that renders victorious.

The Mondrian known to the world at large would be totally apolitical. Later in his life, he did not even voice opinions about economic oppression or human inequality; he seemed totally impervious to the needs of people who were struggling. Artists or critics who met him in Paris or London or New York were unaware that he had ever been a social radical, or even concerned about factories workers or any other victims of oppression. It

[425] Letter Van den Briel to Welsh [no date], RKD #0632, inv.nr. 25.

would be as if he completely eradicated something in himself, as surely and absolutely as he removed natural, subject matter from his painting.

But Albert van den Briel, who at the start of 1903 had not yet moved out of Amsterdam, witnessed firsthand Mondrian's brief and consuming involvement in political action. In hoping to ameliorate what he considered the devastating injustice apparent in the plight of the urban poor, Mondrian aligned himself with an anarchist group that condoned violence.

It required Van den Briel to point out to him that the people he had considered saviors were in fact despots. Having never before experienced personal danger, Mondrian was slow to recognize that they wanted to use him as their tool, with no regard to the possible consequences for Mondrian himself while the rest of them had little risk of being caught. Van den Briel opened Mondrian's eyes to the real threat to his own well-being if he let his anarchist compatriots dictate his role. I believe Van den Briel's account. Without someone else bending his ear, Mondrian would either have been so naïve that he might have stepped over the edge. And his personally infatuation with one of the anarchists blinded Mondrian further to the risk he was prepared to take.

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Regardless of when and exactly why and under what circumstances Mondrian entered the single episode in his life of political radicalism, by the spring of 1903 he faced the problem that befalls so many idealists: a disillusionment with his comrades, however worthy their shared purpose is.[426] Like his father, he felt betrayed by the people he had once considered his allies. Van den Briel had opened his eyes, and Mondrian sunk into a state of utter despair.

He was depressed both because he felt that the situation of the slum dwellers was truly hopeless, given the chicanery of their purported saviors, and because he saw that his alleged compatriots hoped to use him cruelly.

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[426] We do not know the details of Mondrian's initial immersion in his new causes; exactly when he joined the bandwagon or what the specific organizations were. All we know is that by the spring of 1903 his involvement had crescendoed, presumably following as many as three years at the fringes. It is possible that his leap into anarchism coincided with the break-up with Nell Harrenstein—but what precipated what is impossible to know. I am too old to dissemble for the sake of avoiding criticism. I personally think there was a sexual element to *all* of it. Either Mondrian realized that he could never marry Nell, the unsuitability of his artistic profession being a ruse, because he was more sexually interested in men, and already had, at least, a crush on one of the male anarchits, or, upon Nell recognizing that Mondrian simply did not lust for her, she broke off the engagement, and Mondrian, despondent, sought companionship elsewhere, which is when he responded to the advances of a male anarchist. You will see, in the chronological sequence of this text, what had led me to these ideas. I am not certain of them, but I am certain that many Mondrian authorities will consider me nuts even for positing this point of view.

He could not see an alternate means of helping the poor, yet he did not believe that the end justified the means. The methods of the anarchists, if successful, depended on violence and might kill people, and he was their stool pigeon.

Still, Mondrian remained, according to Van den Briel, too 'trusting.' The artist felt torn apart; he was unsure in whom or what he should put his faith. His anarchist friends labeled Van den Briel a capitalist and treated him as 'the enemy.'[427] Their attitude toward his closest friend disturbed Mondrian as did his worries about his own safety, but, at the same time, he was unable to ignore the plight of the impoverished people he was determined to help.

There was a general strike in Amsterdam that April 1903. The result of the largest dispute between workers and management since the Netherlands had become industrialized, it halted almost all transport by rail or ship. In the aftermath of the demonstrations, Mondrian's colleagues declared their course.

Mondrian finally made his decision. The risks the anarchists were demanding of him jeopardized his own life. He made a concerted effort to break away from his former cohorts. 'But they did not let him go.'[428]

It was not new for Mondrian to disagree with the anarchists; he had, on many previous occasions, criticized their tactics even if he championed their purpose. But once they saw him leaving their ranks, they terrorized him. Mondrian became riddled with fears. This was the moment when he became completely unable to paint. 'He started to lose his grip,' Van den Briel tells us.[429] Mondrian hoped that by living there with Carel and Louis, he would be secure.

Yet the anarchists continued to hound him. It was impossible for Mondrian to be safe.

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Here Van den Briel links these events with Mondrian's engagement to marry. But 'was afraid that getting married would curtail his economic independence, so that he would be obliged to make art that he could sell rather than produce work of his own choice.'[430]

Van den Briel describes Mondrian as entirely dejected that spring, blaming himself when his planned marriage was called off. But to whom was Mondrian engaged? Was there a secret engagement with Nell Harrenstein, unknown to her parents, that was then scrapped because she and Mondrian realized he would not make the requisite changes in his

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[427] Albert van den Briel to Robert Welsh, '7e mededeeling', [no date], RKD #0632, inv.nr. 010.

[428] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[429] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[430] Charles de Mooij; Maureen Trappeniers, *Piet Mondriaan. Een jaar in Brabant. 1904/1905*, Waanders, Zwolle 1989, p. 11.

professional life? Van den Briel does not provide the name of the woman Mondrian supposedly planned to marry. Writing almost half a century after these events, had Van den Briel simply conveyed an impression that was accurate, with the details wrong? Was the truth simply that Mondrian had been thwarted in love, with Nell Harrenstein, even if the notion of a desired marriage got no further than Nell's and Mondrian's imagination, to which Mondrian made Van den Briel privy, and the idea of an official marriage engagement and its termination was added in Van den Briel's imagination after a lapse of fifty years? Or was there another woman, and an actual public plan to wed. Or had Van den Briel provided Mondrian with a beard?

#

By the summer of 1903, Mondrian 'had lost his faith in his fellow human beings, due to the events of the previous months. He had lost his idealized view of humanity, but also his idealized view of what it meant to be an artist. His work suffered badly as a result, Mondrian believed.'[431] Van den Briel observed that for Mondrian a sense of balance was 'a prerequisite for being able to work,'[432] and that his inner turmoil prohibited his painting satisfactorily. The small number of pictures he produced were weak. Mondrian recognized that to get back on board as an artist, he needed to regain equilibrium and resolution in his everyday life.

We need to read between the lines of Van den Briel's commentary on Mondrian's discomfort. There was, the forester tells us, 'a further issue troubling the painter. Mondrian was in those days also vulnerable because of other reasons, and the case will not be discussed here. He got out of balance thanks to a questionable matter, and wrote to one of his old friends who was in Brabant.'[433] The writer is being coy; the old friend was Van den Briel himself.

The letter about the 'further issue' alarmed him. The voice of Mondrian's letter discussing 'the questionable matter' was alien; it lacked the 'semi-ironic, mocking tone in which he normally wrote.'[434]

While simply saying it 'will not be discussed here,' Van den Briel appears to know the nature of Mondrian's dilemma. There was another occasion, however, when Van den Briel, in a letter that he knew could be transcribed and printed, again mentions Mondrian's disequilibrium and that letter where the painter describes 'the questionable matter.' This time the forester declares 'Something was awry, although I didn't know what it was, of course.'[435] Knowing that what he said would be more public than when he

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[431] De Mooij, *Brabant,* p. 11.
[432] De Mooij, *Brabant,* p. 11-12.
[433] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.
[434] Letter Albert van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, November 18 1964, quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 61.
[435] Letter Albert van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, November 18 1964, quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 61.

was writing in private to Welsh, he now feigned ignorance; it was no longer sufficient simply to exercise discretion.

The mysterious issue plaguing the artist would be revealed over a year later, however, and ultimately Albert van den Briel would be the one to spill the beans.

XXX

Mondrian decided to leave Amsterdam immediately after receiving Van den Briel's letter inviting him to visit at the start of July 1903. He took a train from Amsterdam's bustling central station to 's-Hertogenbosch, the capital of the province of North Brabant. 's-Hertogenbosch was only eighty kilometers to the south of Amsterdam, but as they walked into the recently constructed station, a large brick structure just outside the ramparts of town, Mondrian felt as if he had stepped back in time, and away from his troubles. 's-Hertogenbosch was a lovely fortified city which was the birthplace of Hieronymus Bosch, dominated by a splendid Gothic cathedral, and one could readily imagine the personages of Bosch's paintings, not the bizarre torturers and their victims so much as the everyday peasant types, going about their everyday business on the central square.

The twenty-two-year-old forester took the thirty-one-year-old artist in hand. Van den Briel met him at the gate after he walked along the train platform, he felt immediately restored to see the person he most trusted in the world. Mondrian was clearly rattled. He needed the calm of Van den Briel's steady, assured, welcoming voice, and simple guidance. Van den Briel ushered him onto the steam tram to Veghel, a Catholic town, newly prosperous, with impressive Neo-Gothic buildings that had been recently constructed as new agricultural methods brought wealth to the region.

Mondrian was steadied in part by the landscape itself. While, like the rest of the Netherlands, North Brabant is flat, it is unusual in that nearly every part of it is above sea level, unlike the rest of the country, which is almost entirely below the normal height of the earth's oceans. Brabant consists mainly of natural forests and farming country, carefully cultivated and dotted with pretty villages.

From Veghel, Mondrian and Van den Briel began to walk through the idyllic landscape. The flat terrain was easy to navigate. On foot, sharing the weight of Mondrian's luggage between them, the two continued on dirt roads and across open fields to the small rural village of Nistelrode.

They stayed there in the one local inn. Overlooking the village square, it was used mostly by cattle buyers. Mondrian and Van den Briel were anomalies. They belonged to a different world than the robust country types trading in livestock. They were dressed in sophisticated clothing, and if the younger man's job as a manager of woodland was not entirely out of the norm, his older companion's profession as an artist was something of which

most of the local people had never even heard. But the other guests at the inn, all men selling and buying cattle, and the women who served them at dinner and kept the inn clean and in good running order, went out of their way to make the travelers feel welcome and relaxed at dinner. Mondrian absorbed the simple friendliness as if it were mother's milk.

Then Van den Briel took his first concentrated look at the friend he had not seen for the three months since he left Amsterdam. He was disconcerted. Mondrian looked 'pale and tired – and it was as if he had escaped from prison, and had regained freedom.'[436] Mondrian was clearly anguished, but quick to revive. That first night, after they dined with the cattle men, the reunited friends walked around the village. As they passed the mill and old farm buildings, Van den Briel saw the artist visibly come back to life. 'Mondrian enjoyed what he saw. Peace and quiet.'

As he became more relaxed, Mondrian touched on his recent suffering. He allowed to Van den Briel that for the past couple of months he had had little appetite and slept fitfully at best. The 'abundant food' at dinner had been his first substantial meal in a long time. He was beginning to feel like his old self, relieved of some crushing burden. 'After a pot of beer, he slept like a log.'[437] It was clearly the first time he felt comfortable and secure after a personal nightmare.

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Mondrian followed that solid night of sleep, the first he had had in months, with a big country breakfast. Now well-rested, he relished the company of the other guests around the large table at the inn even more than he had the night before. These men who had come to buy or sell cattle were straight-shooters, cheerful and friendly, and their openness restored his spirits. Nearly a generation older than he and Van den Briel, they were rugged types, resolved in their ways, but they were full of humor. They included the two visitors in their banter, making Mondrian feel far more comfortable than he had with other people in a long time. He was astonished to feel restored so quickly given how demolished the Amsterdam anarchists had left him.

Fortified in body and soul, Mondrian and Van den Briel headed out of Nistelrode on foot. They walked toward the southwest, exploring with no particular objective. They penetrated stands of pines and wandered through small fens, areas of thick brush, and acres of forest. Then they reached a sweeping meadow where they lay down next to one another in the sun.

Lying there, Mondrian did most of the talking. He told Van den Briel that recent events in Amsterdam had left him 'out of balance' and determined 'to escape from society.' Van den Briel does not tell us what had happened to Mondrian, only that it left him consumed by 'a feeling of hate against people.'[438] He claimed to be considering living like the artist Matthijs

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[436] Van den Briel, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 12.
[437] Van den Briel, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 12.
[438] Van den Briel, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 12.

Maris, who had 'withdrawn from mankind' and become a virtual hermit. Yet for all his misery, Mondrian was determined not to be driven to the life of a recluse.[439] He knew that his current antipathy to his fellow human beings would not last forever; the amiable farmers at breakfast had him already starting to like people again, and Van den Briel's friendship was a reminder that companionship of someone he could trust far beat isolation.

What Van den Briel then quotes Mondrian as having said is harder to understand. But in its combination of being provocative and elusive, it has the ring of truth; Mondrian as we will come to know him through his writing was often both. Van den Briel reports that 'while lying on the heath,' Mondrian said, "'It is not right for me to turn away in resentment, whereas I can see an oncoming shower of rain without resentment, when I am in the fields painting, and have to pack up my things.'"[440] Van den Briel interpreted this to mean that Mondrian was declaring foolhearty to not focus only on problems and the downside of existence. It was wiser to detach oneself from the difficulties in life and to stop feeling angry. Mondrian was determined to get past his bitterness and focus on what was beautiful and salubrious.

#

To recover from the pain of the human relationships that had gone sour in Amsterdam, Mondrian was formulating his future way of life. With Nell Harrenstein and then with the men who were his fellow political, Mondrian had tasted a certain intimacy that had not panned out. The wounds were deep. He would not get as close to anyone ever again.

His plan was to maintain his solitude, but not forsake humanity. It was very clear in his mind. Mondrian would from here on cultivate a measured interaction with other people in the same way that he would calculate proportions of color and line in his paintings. Life, like art, was a balancing act. Equilibrium became his goal in personal relations as it was in the composition of his canvases.

Lying on the meadow with his sympathetic young confidante at his side, Mondrian was constructing himself as the rare individual who could regulate what for most people is a source of havoc. His passions would flourish, but their objects were spiritual unity and beauty itself, in generalized forms. He would assiduously avoid the forms of human interaction that, at least for him, could only be destructive.

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Mondrian and Van den Briel stayed at the inn in Nistelrode for nearly a week. On each day, they spent 'many hours … upon that heath.' The midsummer idyll brought Mondrian back to life. Van den Briel, referring to

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[439] Cf. Letter Albert van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, November 18 1964, as quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 66.

[440] Letter Albert van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, November 18 1964, as quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 63.

himself in the third person, describes Mondrian's cure as 'talking, taking a nap beside a small fen under the watchful eye of his friend, which whom he said he felt safe, and who soothed him with imaginative tales.'[441]

On their second day of exploring the region on foot, they happened into a farmyard which led to a small farmhouse surrounded by a dense grove of poplars. This farmhouse, in a small village called Dinther, was also a kind of pub so the farmer and his wife not only welcomed them but invited them to lunch. Mondrian felt as if a pleasant spell had been cast. The farmer, Hannes Dortmans, and his wife Grada were outgoing and generous to such an extent that the faith in human beings he felt he had lost only a week earlier was restored. On what would be the first of many visits to the Dortmanses, Mondrian and Van den Briel each quaffed a stein of beer and ate sandwiches of salted butter and ham on hearty homemade bread. For Mondrian, the sandwiches were an apotheosis. Their impact was so strong that sixty years after the event, Van den Briel still recalled the homemade ingredients so precisely that we can taste and crave them ourselves. The robust textures and flavors, downed with beer, epitomized a healthy, honest approach to life.

Van den Briel describes Mondrian 'dreamily observing the room in which we sat.' The refugee from Amsterdam had a visceral response to the whitewashed walls, the red of the painted doors and some of the wooden furniture, the large fireplace full of ashes, 'and a goat lying by the wall.' The sparkling plaster and the bright red set against it were like magic. The farmer's cottage had a purity to it. Mondrian felt uplifted, as if his soul were cleansed of its tortures. After they left the Dortmanses' cottage, Mondrian told Van den Briel that everything about the lunch there had given him a sense of well-being that he had feared would never return.[442]

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On the fifth day of the trip, Mondrian took Van den Briel to visit Christiaan Hendrik Hammes, an artist who had been a fellow student at the Rijksakademie and was living in Nistelrode. Mondrian was keenly aware that he would be leaving to return to Amsterdam the following day. He was curious about what had happened to his former classmate's art since moving there, but he had postponed the encounter until the last moment so as not to feel trapped by Hammes.

The paintings were humdrum. Hammes himself was discouraged by his own recent work, and blamed the framework of the painting he was working on for the lack of spirit in his canvases. Mondrian, as quoted by Van den

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[441] Letter Van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, as quoted in: Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 13. For these imaginative tales, see also: Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn, as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 98-107.

[442] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 13.

Briel, made another of his ambiguous remarks. In a 'dry' tone, he declared, "'Let's use it to make a tambourine.'"[443]

A tambourine? An artist's canvas should be banged like a percussion instrument, one of the most jarring in the orchestra, more the tool of a marching band?

Van den Briel, however, understood the odd remark. Mondrian had determined his future. Following his return to Amsterdam the next day and a trip to Spain he had planned to take at the end of summer with Simon Maris, he would head back to Brabant 'for good.'[444]

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Only a week earlier, Mondrian had snapped. For months his life had becoming untenable, as it only can when one thinks one has found the answer and then has it fly back in his face. But now all was resolved.

To keep his mental balance and be able to paint, he needed to live in the countryside and be with decent, hard-working people. He would be sustained by simple country food, and live healthily. He was through with Amsterdam.

The circumstances of the life he had created for himself there had come to terrify him, but he had found salvation. Mondrian's notion of taking his colleague's second-rate canvas, holding the lifeless object high in the air, and pummeling it like a tambourine, announced his decision and his excitement over it. He would live in a way he had never before imagined. His plan was to extricate himself from the metropolis, and escape forever the sort of situation that had paralyzed him. And he would bang that tambourine with his painting as well, putting the constraints of academic painting behind him and making a new art that would reverberate loud and clear.

XXXI

Mondrian worked out the details. He returned to his brothers' apartment in Watergraafsmeer simply to prepare for the trip to Spain, knowing that as soon as he and Maris returned, he would organize his affairs in Amsterdam, pack up all of his wordly possessions, which were not that many, and move permanently.

In the meantime, the journey through Belgium and France toward Bilbao and then further south would get him a safe distance from his tormenters. And his traveling companions were reliable, steady friends. Besides Simon Maris, there was a third man; Frits Bodenheim was the brother of the artist Nelly Bodenheim, who had been a classmate of Mondrian's at the Rijksakademie. Both of them belonged to the milieu traditional artists and

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[443] 'Waarop M. droog opmerkte: "Maak er een tambourijn van"', letter Van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, as quoted in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 102.
[444] Seuphor, *Mondrian,* p. 53.

their support well-heeled professionals, stalwarts of mainstream bourgeois values and old-fashioned Christian doctrine.

A photo shows Mondrian and Simon Maris on the wharf at IJmuiden harbor just as they were embarking late August 1903.[445] Bodenheim probably took the picture. It is the image of a safe and comfortable way of life. Mondrian had rejoined a social stature completely removed from the type of people who had brought him to a crisis point, and he was delighted to have his return to traditional values preserved in a snapshot. He and Maris are flanked by two attractive women. Stylishly dressed in summer white, these ladies, exactly the age and social status Mondrian's and Maris's families considered appropriate for them, sport elegant parasols and white hats. One was Wies Bodenheim, Nelly and Frits' sister, and the other was Mies van de Water, a niece of Jozef Israëls. Part of the group of painters known as Amsterdamse Joffers (Amsterdam ladies), who were regulars at Maris's studio get-togethers, they belonged to an artistic circle, but not a radical one, and had the makings of suitable wives for Mondrian and Maris, ideal mothers for the children they were expected to have. After all, the bachelor artists were both near the age of thirty, Mondrian slightly older, and the time had come to think in this way.

In this photo taken just before he was to embark on his Spanish holiday, Mondrian, standing tall, impeccably dressed, sports the new beard which he had started to grow in Brabant. It is carefully trimmed; if more bohemian in style than his clean-shavedness to date, it is well tented, like everything about his appearance. He cuts a dashing figure. After his difficult spring, he appears vigorous and confident with his well-heeled companions, the solid men and fetching ladies, who belonged to his old Amsterdam life, the company he kept in his pre-Anarchist days. And what better way to assert his masculinity than a bold growth of facial hair?

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A second photo from the trip shows Maris and Mondrian in Bordeaux, eating al fresco under a canopied awning. Again it was presumably Bodenheim who took the picture. Maris and Mondrian are clinking glasses at a good restaurant with starched white tablecloths. The funding for such an elegant repast must have been Maris's. Mondrian had been able to afford the basics of the trip only because he had sold a still-life in the Arti et Amicitiae show that took place in April and May, and two oil landscapes and a watercolor of chrysanthemums in the St. Lucas exhibition held in May

[445] Photographs of this Spain trip are in the Archive of Simon Maris and family at RKD #0257 inv.nr. 93. The exact dates of the trip are unknown, but thanks to two postcards Simon Maris sent to his father, we can reconstruct the dates of the journey fairly accurately: late August 1903 until September 26 1903. See Gorter, 'Mies Maris', p.27.

and June, and had had a portrait commission.[446] Still, he was not flush, and had to scrimp knowing that, following the trip, he would be moving to a place where he had no clients or patrons, and where few people had the means to buy paintings.

The travelers continued south from Bordeaux to Biarritz, and then across the border to Bilbao and on to central Spain. Few other details are known.[447] Six years later, in 1909, Mondrian would perform a bull fight at a Spanish Evening held by the Saint Lucas Society, explaining that he knew the moves because he had gone to one; this is just about the only fact on record of those weeks on the Iberian continent. Van den Briel said that 'the trip was not what he [Mondrian] expected of it.'[448] And Michel Seuphor would write that the journey to Spain 'was a disappointment.'[449] He reports that Mondrian could not paint because 'the light was too different from that of Holland,' was bothered by bullfights, did not enjoy the people, and came back earlier than planned. On the other hand, Seuphor dates the trip to 1901, and his report on Mondrian and bullfighting is inconsistent with the Saint Lucas performance, so there is no reason to trust the other "facts" when we know two to be wrong.

We have no information, however, except that the three men spent over a month traveling deep into the country from which victims of the Inquisition had fled to the Netherlands three centuries earlier. Except for his trip to Hannah Crabb in England, this was the only time in his life when Piet Mondrian would travel as a tourist, and the closest thing to a vacation he would ever take, it will remain, unless some unexpected trove of documents emerges, a crucial time period about which we can only guess and conjecture. All that is certain is that it was a respite from some turmoil that had preceded it.

#

As soon as he was back in Amsterdam after the trip to Spain, Mondrian lost no time preparing his move to Brabant. He sold everything in his studio that anyone would buy. He had a number of paintings, still in stock, and offered them at discounted prices to his few steady clients, who lapped up the opportunity to buy them. He got rid of the many copper pots and pans, and at least one of the Persian carpets. He needed every penny he could raise,

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[446] A261 *Still Life with a Plaster Bust*, 1902-03, was sold for 200 guilders at Arti, Welsh, *CR I,* p. 122 and 258.

[447] Cf. Gorter, *Mies Maris*, p. 27-32. Van den Briel also indicates that little is known about this Spain trip: 'Over die reis is niets in mijn brieven (behalve 2 briefkaarten […] en hij heeft er later ook heel weinig van verteld.' Letter Van den Briel to Cor Blok, December 3 1962, as quoted in Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 32.

[448] Letter Van den Briel to Cor Blok, December 3 1962. Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 32.

[449] Seuphor, *Mondrian,* p. 53.

and he planned never to return. And material possessions had no meaning to him.

That September, Mondrian put canvases called *Evening* and *Grazing Calves* into a show of work by Living Masters that would be on view at the Stedelijk through November, and in October he chose *Late Evening* as his submission to the Arti et Amicitiae exhibition in October and November.[450] He would leave town on a high note, accepted as one of the most successful young painters currently at work. Even if he had sold his older work for relatively low sums to clear out his studio, the prices of these new paitings were his strongest ever. *Evening* was at six hundred guilders, which was over twice the amount he had previously asked for a single painting.[451] It was a larger canvas than usual, which justified the price, and he sold it. We know this only because all trace of the painting disappeared following the Stedelijk show. So the appearance and destiny of Mondrian's highest sale to date pass into the realm of mysteries about Piet Mondrian, but at least we knew that he was heading into his life of retreat with success in his wings.

The sale of *Evening* for that amount of money in 1903 suggests a degree of commercial success that contradicts Mondrian's perpetual claims of poverty. He would often tell others he might have to give up painting because he was broke. Lifelong, he convinced himself that he was in dire financial straits. Money, like everything else in his life – even the form of his mustache – was not a straightforward matter. He often felt desperate, accepting loans and even handouts from friends, yet he was highly moral about the money advanced to it, always repaying his benefactors generously with art. He seems to have needed to feel – always, for the rest of his life – that he was living on the edge. It reduced his capacity to live luxuriously, or to have a family; it was a means of feeling lean, unencumbered by material comfort, and, in a way, hungry – which suited him psychologically.

Still, when Mondrian said he would make a tambourine of what he saw at Christiaan Hammes's studio in Nistelrode, he was referring only to the bang he would put in his own work. Those of his recent paintings that commanded high prices were tepid at best. With their murky tonality, the pastoral scenes of 1902-1903 lacked the panache of what Mondrian had painted in happier time periods, starting when he first picked up pencil and brush as a teenager and focused his sights on the miracles of the natural world. He intended to paint with renewed vigor as soon as he moved. By the end of 1903, he had sold the accoutrements of his old life, stripped himself to the essentials, and secured his finances at least for the next few months, given the low cost of country living. He was fully ready to move to a place that felt like the end of the world, not just to start life anew but to

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[450] UA15 *Avond*; UA16 *Grazende Kalfjes*; UA 17 *Late Avond*.

[451] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 474. 600 guilders has the equivalent of over 7500 euro nowadays. Historical currency converter used from the Internationaal Instituut voor Sociale Geschiedenis (http://www.iisg.nl/hpw/calculate-nl.php).

paint as he dreamed. The market for his work did not matter; he had a vision well beyond his everyday needs.

Brabant

I

On January 18, 1904, Mondrian arrived in the village of Uden, seven kilometers east of Nistelrode. Mondrian had asked Van den Briel to find him a place in Uden specifically. August Allebé, the professor from the Rijksakademie who had been his closest aid and mentor, had stayed there and been enthusiastic about the town and its surroundings.[452] Allebé had talked about the piety and spirituality of the local population, most of them deeply religious Roman Catholics who attended mass regularly. Mondrian did not care specifically about their doctrine and their rituals, but the Dortmanses' devout Catholicism had impressed him greatly for its emphatic belief as transcendental values over materialism. This quality of the region's inhabitants attracted him more than anything else. The sincerity of their devotion, not the doctrine, was vital to him. Mondrian intended to spend the rest of his life in the local area, and moving there seven months before his thirty-second birthday, had made his choice carefully.

Gemert, where Van den Briel lived, was only fifteen kilometers from Uden. This assured Mondrian a quality of companionship he had never before experienced. He revered Mondrian and devoted himself to the artist's well-being as had no one since Mondrian's mother when he was a child. And while he knew little about art, he saw Mondrian, and Mondrian alone, as a sort of messiah. Van den Briel was dependable and practical, and undemanding for himself. While he made Mondrian the priority of his life, his day job as a forester was important to him but not as significant. Mondrian had in his young friend a selfless devotee whose presence was life-altering.

Albert van den Briel had arranged Mondrian's accommodations in Uden by renting him part of a house belonging to Louis van Zwanenbergh, a cattle merchant. The house was on Sint-Jansstraat, which cut through the center of town. The road to Nistelrode, it was the town's main thoroughfare.

The province of Brabant is bordered by Belgium to the south and the Meuse River to the north, the river delta flowing through the fertile Biesbosch area assuring the region excellent conditions for agriculture. Most of its inhabitants grew and harvested and processed wheat and sugar beet and secondary crops, or cared for cows and other livestock. Those who were not actually farmers were the shopkeepers, doctors, suppliers and others whose services the farmers required. The natural situation and hard-work mentality of the local people contributed to Brabant having a robust economy. There was none of the economic balance that had distressed Mondrian in Amsterdam, with its extremes of rich and poor; rather, there

[452] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 14.

was a uniform situation where, if no one had a fortune, most everyone was modestly flourishing. That general state of human well-being, combined with the reverence for neighborly kindness and an acceptance of the self and of material wealth being less important than a sense of the large life of the universe, were idyllic for Mondrian.

Uden dated back to the twelfth century. The high point of its history was when a meteor fell into a field on its outskirts in 1840 and narrowly missed some laborers digging for peat. The town of about three thousand, five hundred people was a quiet and peaceful place, except during its large cattle markets, which were held every three weeks and attracted farmers from all over the region. It was enough of a town, however, so that Mondrian could buy paints, canvas, and paper there. In addition to the shops, there were a post office and small train station, and once a week the local farmers set up stalls selling their produce as well as meat and cheese and bread. He had everything he needed to lead his deliberately simple existence.

#

In Uden, for the first time in his life, Mondrian registered himself as a "painter, artist."[453] In the past, he had identified himself as a student, a commissioned portraitist, a drawing instructor, or a combination of those positions. Now he had both escaped an untenable situation and decided in a new way, in this life organized by Van den Briel, who he was.

The first thing Mondrian did to settle into his new existence and be able to start painting again was to transform his physical surroundings in the Van Zwanenbergh's house. On the wall opposite the window facing the street, he suspended a large brown leather screen. The daylight that came in through the window would bounce off of the matte leather and glow warmly. Half a century later Van den Briel would recall that Mondrian was thrilled to observe the consequent change of tone throughout the room once he had mounted the piece of leather: 'I have a clear memory of the satisfaction in his voice, when he said that it gave such a beautiful tone to the light in the studio.'[454] Mondrian immediately started new paintings that had the warm luminosity he had created in the room. He was discovering light as a vehicle to convey emotion. These first Brabant pictures had a luster consistent with his new contentment and serenity.

With Van den Briel Mondrian discussed his new ease at being away from the people and situation that had made him too miserable to paint for the previous few months. He happily assured his young friend that the region to which he had brought him was all it promised to be. The local people were as unfailingly decent and honest as Mondrian had felt on his first visit. Van den Briel had been right that the farmers and cattlemen would be the

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[453] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 123. Cf. De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 14.

[454] Letter Van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, July 17 1965, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 14.

perfect antidote to his anarchist cohort. The regional food seemed sacred in its connection with the bounty of the earth. Van den Briel visited Mondrian almost every evening, arriving by bicycle after stopping at farms to procure sausage, ham, and bacon that the farmers made from their own pigs, as well as freshly churned butter and eggs that had just been laid. Mondrian devored the bread baked by the peasant women. He told Van den Briel that the experience was 'eating and drinking at the same time.' This dark-wheat country loaf with its hard crust was the perfect vehicle for cheese or lard or goose fat or butter, the contrast of textures brittle and soft, dry and unctuous, a thrill. He felt that he directly absorbed its goodness and honesty. Each day he felt himself freshly nourished. He was becoming fortified; he was, as he had never been before, happy. He had escaped his private hell to relish the simple bounty of life. 'It was here, at Uden, that the real Mondrian was born,' Van den Briel would tell Michel Seuphor. [455] Moving to a rural village in an unfamiliar region, the thirty-one-year-old artist was, except for the presence of the twenty-two-year-old Van den Briel, restarting at zero. From here on, this would be his norm. Mondrian would never stay in a new location for as long as he intended, but whenever he made a radical leap, he would readily leave most of his physical possessions, and all of his personal baggage behind, so long as he could live at a subsistence level and paint. This would be true from the start of 1904 in a small Dutch village when he hung the leather on the wall to capture the light he loved, through the start of 1944 in midtown Manhattan when he joyfully evoked the neon of Broadway working on the *Victory Boogie Woogie*.

#

Mondrian and Van den Briel regularly played cards with farmers who addressed them as "Piet" and "Albert" and did not even know their last names. The games were part of Mondrian's metamorphosis. Van den Briel noticed that while Mondrian was at ease with the peasants with whom they played cards, the artist was now far more on his guard than he had been back in Amsterdam. He told Seuphor, 'Mondrian never again had the same relations with people. In Paris he continually changed his baker and grocer, in order to remain a stranger in the places where he shopped.'[456]

Yet, as ardently as Mondrian wanted to guard his own privacy and protect a degree of anonymity, he was determined to remain aware of the needs of other people. 'The crust around the inner man is so thick in Amsterdam,' Mondrian told Van den Briel. Now that he was around people who were essentially decent and allowed him whatever he needed for his self-respect, and did not force him into dangerous territory, he intended to live thoughtfully and contribute what he could for the world. 'In an inner sense, and among his friends, Piet always remained the man he became

[455] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 54.
[456] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 54.

during the days at Brabant,' Van den Briel observed to Michel Seuphor.[457] For it was here that Mondrian determinately began to divide and parcel his existence as he would later compose his abstract paintings. He acquired a control he considered essential to his salvation; from now on, he would sense when he was safe and could be expansive, and when he had to be on his guard and protect himself. He did not want to have too tough a shell, but he would be careful never again to be in the sort of situation he had fled.

For the rest of his life, Mondrian would accommodate his need to be with other people—in dance halls and cafés, at art openings and occasional dinners with friends—while protecting himself from any relationship that would upset the balance of his life. His eleven years in Amsterdam had ended in disaster, with his regretting how close he had become to individuals determined to break all the social rules and make him a part of their revolution. He had become personally entangled at too high a price. In Brabant, he hardened his resolve to exercise greater prudence. He could not endure a sense of danger, and would never again allow personal relationships to impinge on his ability to make the best possible art.

#

I wish Mondrian had made at least one statement, anywhere, to anyone, about Albert van den Briel. Van den Briel was his life line, but we do not know how Mondrian felt about him.

They had first met only three years earlier. Still, the young forester was the person to whom he turned at the lowest point in his life—the moment that frightened him the most. More than two world wars, his own illnesses, his parents' deaths, the world financial depression, a level of poverty that nearly upended him and forced him to give up painting, a loneliness and solitude most people would find untenable, and unexpected and sudden physical relocations, what has occurred in Amsterdam in the spring of 1903 had shattered him. He embraced the solution Van den Briel provided, and stuck with it joyfully and unquestionably, but how much of a factor was Van den Briel himself.

They never actually lived together, but for as long as Mondrian remained in Uden, the two saw each other constantly. When Van den Briel was near enough, that meant every evening and all weekend long; when the distance was substantial, their encounters were reduced to one during the week, while throughout the weekends as always. Mostly Van den Briel would cycle to him in Uden, but when Van den Briel did not come to him, Mondrian would hop on his bicycle and make the trip to Gemert or wherever Van den Briel was.

After he left his parents' house in Winterswijk at age twenty, this was more time than Mondrian would ever spent with any other human being for the rest of his life. Even when he lived with the Wormser twins or his own

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[457] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 54.

brothers, they simply shared digs, rather than making a point of being together for the daily meals and long conversations. Yet Mondrian hardly ever mentioned Van den Briel in letters to others, at least not in the ones that have been preserved, in discussions of his life and interviews with journalists, or in the essays where autobiographical snippets exist between the lines although he was technically writing in generalizations.
Like most biographers, I go with what is there—and perpetually search for more. After thinking about Mondrian and Van den Briel over the course of several years, I suddenly began to think about what is not there. Why would Mondrian leave out of his own history the young forester who meant so much to him? Why in all the letters to Theo van Doesburg when he names one person after another whose life intertwined with his own does he never once mention the individual with whom he spent more time than anyone else?

#

During their evenings in the rented part of Van Zwanenbergh's house, Mondrian and Van den Briel had certain rituals. Sitting together facing a blazing fire, both recuperating from their days' work, they would read and talk. Mondrian's book of choice for much of 1904 was the Bible.[458] He and Van den Briel often discussed religion—not just the Christian dogma they both knew intimately, but other faiths as well. Mondrian was especially focused on the theories of Theosophy, evaluating its principle tenets in comparison to other belief systems.[459]

Mondrian was the cook. Preparing evening meals for himself and Van den Briel over the hot coals, he became adept at roasting and grilling. His greatest triumph was his leg of lamb, which he made whenever Van Zwanenbergh gave him one.[460] He also used the open fireplace to prepare farmers' coffee, a powerful brew for which Mondrian put ground coffee into a copper pot and added furiously boiling water. He then placed the pot into the hot ashes of the fire until the coffee had the intensity he desired.

That way of making coffee became a habit Mondrian would maintain for the rest of his life. In Paris and New York, he would astonish visitors with it.[461] Yet he appears never to have talked about the circumstances of his developing the brew, during his refuge from a way of life he feared would destroy him, and with a young male companion who was his safety net.

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[458] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 2.
[459] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv.nr. 1; Cf. De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 17.
[460] 'Hij was ook veehandelaar, en gaf M geregeld een stuk lamsvlees als hij voor zichzelf geslacht had.' Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 2.
[461] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 17.

II

Van den Briel was determined to educate Mondrian about the natural world now that the artist had left the city for the countryside. Between medical school and his training as a botanist, Van den Briel knew the subject well, and felt that knowledge of it would potentially serve Mondrian's painting. But in little time, the forester became skeptical. He could not educate a student who was so completely averse to the subject. Van den Briel writes, 'Mondrian was wary of insects in general, and particularly frightened of spiders. Of horses, too, and sometimes of cows, for instance when he saw them coming towards him at dusk as they were herded homeward along the country lanes around Nistelrode. He was always relieved once they were past. […] Only very rarely was more than a passing interest aroused, as occurred with an Atalanta butterfly in Uden some time later, but he was never moved to draw or paint such subjects.'[462] Mondrian was not only uninterested in the structure of living beings, but was frightened by harmless ones like owls, and even though cows became one of his favorite subjects to paint, he could only observe them when he was certain that they were safely fenced off. The single farm animals for which he made an exception were donkeys. He considered them his allies, and found them charming. These beasts of burden are, after all, as intelligent and amiable as they are stubborn. They were unique in Mondrian's eyes both for being innocent and harmless, and for never losing control. But Mondrian had no wish to learn anything about them; Van den Briel tried and failed.

Once he gave up on the chance of Mondrian understanding animals, he tried with plants. He explained their growth from seed, and what was required for them to thrive. Here, too, he failed utterly. Van den Briel could not get the artist to care even remotely, and Mondrian was certainly not someone who would feign polite interest.

Other future modernists—Paul Klee, Le Corbusier, and Anni Albers, for example—were not just beholden to the natural world; they considered knowledge of it vital to their work.

In the tradition of people ranging from Leonardo Da Vinci, to Goethe to Freud and Einstein, they made links between science and art, and relished the continuum. And while Mondrian insistently closed his mind to the details of zoology and botany, he too gravitated to certain if not to all aspects of the natural world. In his philosophical explorations with Van den Briel, he loved hearing and asking and reading about evolution. Late into the night, as the two sat in front of the fire, Mondrian thrilled to the phenomenon elucidated by Charles Darwin. Later in life, Mondrian would compare the evolutionary process to his own creative development, finding parallels between his refinement of proportions and colors and the

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[462] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

progression from apes to human beings. Simplification, and a discarding of the gratuitous, a perpetual improving of the machine, were essential to true progress.

#

The Uden locals may have given balm to Mondrian's soul, but it is likely that most, beyond the rare exceptions like the Dortmanses, were baffled by his personality and way of life. Devoting his days only to painting, the thirty-two-year-old bachelor living alone was not the sort of person they had ever met before. They tolerated him, and were polite, but he would certainly never be one of them, especially with his antipathy to animals. A local sheep farmer took it upon himself to change the ways of the odd, solitary artist from Amsterdam, and gave Mondrian a brown, wire-haired sheep dog, but this was in part because the dog was as abnormal as the man who was now supposed to care for it. The breed was raised to herd sheep, but this one had proved impossible to train. The farmer hoped the recalcitrant creature would help Mondrian overcome his aversion to four-legged creatures, and provide him with the companionship he clearly needed, and that Mondrian could at least solve the problem of the animal's uselessness.

The idea worked. Mondrian named the sheepdog Beppie, which somehow derived from "Albert." Beppie initially resisted his new owner's authority just as he had refused to be made into a herder. However, as time went on, the creature did accept Mondrian as its master, Van den Briel observed. Mondrian became more attached to Beppie than anyone had dared imagine.[463]

Mondrian started to take Beppie with him when he painted outdoors. He proudly told Van den Briel that Beppie kept watch while he worked and protected him. He became so dependent on his companion that when Beppie suddenly did what he was trained to do and followed a flock of sheep he had spotted at a distance, Mondrian felt abandoned. He became highly agitated, and only calmed down when Beppie came back and they were reunited.

His routine was to travel by bike or on foot, Beppie alongside him, to the area west of Uden. There he painted farmhouses and windmills, and lots of cows, singly or grouped, sometimes out in meadows and sometimes in their stalls, but always contained. He invariably began his paintings on site and completed them in his studio.

But what he was most afraid of could not be kept at a safe distance, and he never painted it. Mondrian for the time being stopped making images of other human beings. The single exception, later in the year, would be a biting caricature of his landlord: more monster than man. The events in Amsterdam made him abandon the representation of other people as flesh and blood.

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[463] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

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Mondrian admired the devoutness with which the locals practiced their Catholicism, so he hardly ever worked on Sundays, and certainly not to do so outside.[464] People going to and from mass would have been shocked by this conspicuous disregard of the sanctity of the Sabbath. Growing up in Winterswijk, Mondrian would not have dared such heresy. Although his will to paint was all that mattered, he was grateful for the kindness with which Uden's citizens had taken him in and he did not want to upset them. He was not willing to offend people he liked. Anyway, the chance to paint on his own terms was his consuming priority.

Van den Briel describes one mid-winter Sunday morning when they woke up early and Mondrian proposed that they take off immediately into the countryside. Dawn was about to break, and Mondrian was overcome by his desire to paint under optimal conditions. They rode their bikes to a wind mill east of Uden, and positioned themselves for Mondrian to paint in a nearby fen. As they were getting organized and watched animals drinking, the sun rose; it was a perfect moment.

Suddenly, Mondrian went from being sublimely content to becoming intensely irritable. The light was too strong.

He snapped at Van den Briel. The hardness and intensity of the bright winter sunshine destroyed any chance of painting, he snarled. Mondrian insisted that they head back home immediately.

The moment he and Van den Briel were back inside, Mondrian built a fire in the fireplace and put up a pot of his strong coffee. The glow of the flames, reflected off of the leather screen, was diffuse and warm, more golden than brilliant. Quickly, he began to paint.[465] Having been unable even to pick up his brush in the fen to which he had led them before dawn, he worked through the day, totally serene. He never referred back to the problem of the harsh light, his intemperance toward Van den Briel, the inconveniences of the false start to the day at his insistence. Mondrian needed control: of the setting of his human interaction. He would mastermind light; it was not allowed to blind him. He would never live with anyone else determining the whens and wheres of his existence. He had to be able to rush in and out as he wanted, to be in conditions that worked for him. Van den Briel was the ideal companion. He catered to Mondrian's whims, and made it his own priority to foster Mondrian's ability to paint as he wanted; respectful and malleable, he let Mondrian's priority be his priority. While it lasted, this was the perfect relationship.

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His young devotee not only rescued Mondrian at a crucial moment, but had provided a new source of inspiration. The indigenous architecture of

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[464] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 17.

[465] Van den Briel to J.M. Harthoorn, July 17 1965, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 17-18.

Brabant captivated Mondrian as subject matter that added a totally different dimension to his art. The standard regional building design visibly divides houses into domestic and working spaces; the wall in front of the living quarters is lower than the walls of the threshing floors and stables. The three doors, one for each unit, lined up in a row along the front, declare that life and work exist in tandem. Riveted to these unusual looking structures in which human beings and their animals have tightly intertwined existences, Mondrian painted the farmhouses time and again. He emphasized their elongated façades and the oversized, steep-pitched roofs that resemble high foreheads weighting the structures with placid intelligence.

Producing one small canvas after another of these Brabant dwellings, Mondrian painted as if in a musical trance. The honest and functional forms flow in a melodic rhythm. The buildings rendered him a more emotional painter; the rigor and logic of their architecture mirrored the qualities that struck him in the local people, even if his relationship to them was of someone apart. His role, after all, was that of observer rather than participant, his way of expressing himself entirely through the medium of painting. He focused on the materials as well as the shapes of the structures he studied with such care. They, too, were straightforward, reliable, "what you see is what you get," and with brush and paint he expressed his new reverence, and the well-being consequent to his escape from discomfort to certitude. The brick of the walls, the wood of the doors and window frames, and the straw of the thatched roofs with their rows of baked tiles along the lower edges over the working area, all become palpable. Mondrian carefully positioned the single chimney stack protruding from the roof above the hearth which separated the farmers' home from the place where the animals live, as well as the high double doorway which was for the manure wagons. Devoid of all fluff or artifice, as far as you could get the fancy Amsterdam dining room where he had decorated the ceiling central to and from the bourgeois luxury that was the inequality and instability of the life he had left behind, these Brabant farmhouses exemplify a mastery of life's realities, including the inelegant ones, without window dressing.

Manure sales were a thriving business in Brabant, more essential to its economy than meat or dairy products. The processing and packaging of cow excrement, and its sale as a nutrient, were a mainstay of existence in the new world where Mondrian felt himself coming back into balance. He respected its humble truthfulness. The manure business would subsequently decline in Brabant with the development of chemical fertilizers, but during Mondrian's time there its intelligence and effectiveness were part of what gave him a new sense of reality and revived him.

#

The transformation in Mondrian's painting reached an apogee in the glorious *Farmyard at Nistelrode*, a large watercolor which presents a way of

life based on manure production. [466] Mondrian had made significant technical breakthroughs since moving, and with them put new verve into the work. He now used saturated colors and compact forms to create a high emotional charge. The intensity of the shapes and hues anticipates work that would be done later in the same decade by, to the southeast, the Blaue Reiter artists based in Munich, and, to the north, the Norwegian Edvard Munch. It's not that these disparate artists were directly influenced by one another or deliberately banded together; rather, it was simply a case of painters in various locations continuing the liberation which began with post-Impressionism.

Mondrian did two watercolors of this same farmyard. From now on, he would work in series, trying various approaches to a single theme, and often he attained varying degrees of success. In this version, which outshines the others, he established the sky with a flawless wash of luminous blue over the white paper. That deft expanse of brushed pigment, assured and delicate in the manner of a glaze on the finest bone porcelain, is as uplifting as a cloudless sky illuminated and tinted by brilliant daylight. But, unlike such a sky, it is dependable; fixed in paint, it will remain indefinitely. The broad planes of the typical Brabant roofs, with their varying pitches, interlock in an arresting pattern, equally permanent.

Mondrian has made a playful patchwork of these rectangular roof forms; while depicting his subject with authenticity, he has begun to let loose.

Evoking the real world, he nonetheless has made his artistic choices purely in the interest of visual music. He achieves a strong beat with the support posts which hold up the overhanging front edge of the roof by using them to chop up the solid wash which represents a brick wall behind them. The watercolor captures its subject, but it presents shapes and surfaces as optical entertainment more than the precise details of a farm building.

Above all, the colors, impeccably calibrated to present their subjects both with verisimilitude and personality, are staggering. The green of the grass in the foreground is fringed in vibrant yellow which arrests sunlight on top of the blades. The sequence of pink, mauve, and orange on the side of the barn captures the essence of wood splashed with daylight, but also bursts with the sheer inventiveness and new energy of the reborn artist.

There was another revolutionary element in *Farmyard at Nistelrode*. Mondrian uses the edges of the sheet of paper to cut the imagery off at unexpected points. This surprising way that lines end and forms get severed would, decade later, become hallmarks of Mondrian's geometric compositions.

The tiredness and academism that had often been evident in Mondrian's commissioned work of the previous years, and in the landscapes he had

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[466] A366 Farm Building at Nistelrode I, 1904, Watercolor on paper, 44,5 x 63 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

painted mainly to pay the rent and put food on the table, were eviscerated. Now, with his move to Brabant, his artistic courage was revived. Mondrian had demonstrated in the past his originality paired with his love for seeing. Ever since his first foray into drawing sixteen years earlier, he had periodically unveiled the depth of his passion and showed the gumption to go into uncharted territory; he was back on his independent course.

His decision to live in a remote village with Albert van den Briel the only person form his past to whom he was still close, to eschew the diversions and forms of human congress essential to most people, had served Mondrian well. The maker of *Farmyard at Nistelrode* was visibly consumed by joy. And it was a bounty he shared and gave to others. Mondrian might essentially isolate himself in his way of life, but, supremely alert to the pleasures of seeing, he was eager for other people to benefit from his discoveries. With this imaginative watercolor, executed with dexterity, Mondrian rejoined the ranks of artists from all places and time periods who have in common their exceptional skill and a zeal to open the eyes of humanity at large.

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In a subsequent watercolor, Mondrian goes further in his will toward abstraction by moving in and presenting a close-up detail of the same farmyard (Fig. 17).[467] Now he has reduced his field of vision to only a segment of the roof and façade and foreground, lopped off on all four sides. He is even more preoccupied than before by shape and the framing of vision. He was increasingly content to demote the known world, and its faithful representation, to a secondary position, with invention taking precedence.

Fig. 17. Mondrian, *Farm Building at Nistelrode I*, 1904

[467] A367 *Farm Building at Nistelrode II*, 1904, Watercolor on paper, 41,5 x 62 cm, Whereabouts unknown.

The muted shapes and subtle hues calm the viewer. In his retreat from his tortured existence in Amsterdam, Mondrian had not just found an inner tranquility; he was beginning to make art with the resolution he might never find in himself, but was content to construct on paper or canvas.

Throughout the winter months and into the spring of the first year of what he saw as his permanent new life, he painted non-stop, further developing his compositions in broad planes of uninterrupted, single colors. Now turning thirty-two years of age, he put behind him the tame and careful academic manner of his Amsterdam work and used the local scenery and in particular the Brabant architecture as the basis of paintings where he ventured into uncharted territory and made matter ethereal.

Growing up, he had been odd man out with his brothers, and when he moved to Amsterdam to make art his profession he had already separated himself from his milieu, but until 1903, he had still not departed on his own course. It was in Brabant that, by limiting himself personally, he liberated himself artistically.

III

Who was Piet Mondrian, given that most human beings's norm is to accept the prevailing attitudes of their times? They follow the styles, focus on the latest trends, pay attention to the current market in whatever their field is, take their news from the press, celebrate holidays (today is Christmas after all,) according to tradition. The fads and ideas of "the way it is done" vary, but they are determined by others, no independently. Piet Mondrian—like Paul Cézanne, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, and Giorgio Morandi—was, by instinct, a completely different sort of human being, and apart from the others. These particular painters, more than other twentieth-century masters, existed in their own mental spheres; even if they had artistic colleagues and friends, they were never one of the gang: any gang. Sure, you can place them with "Blue Rider" or "Fauve" or "Neoplasticist," but they were at heart utterly independent.

It was in Uden, the small village to which Albert van den Briel had first lured him six months before he moved there, by plan forever, that aesthetically as well as geographically, Mondrian had left the orbit of his contemporaries. Mondrian had always had the instinct to be one of those rare people—few as they are, they exist in various epochs at a myriad of locations—who are outside their time and place, who belong to something global and infinite much more than the here and now. They concentrate on what has always existed in the world: light, air, horizontality, and verticality. They may notice what comes and goes, but it is of secondary importance. For the rest of his life, more than ever before, following the move to this village, Mondrian would live and act in that otherness. He was not old-

fashioned or quaint; he lived in the present, and relished what it offered, but he saw it as part of the big picture.

He gave Van den Briel *Farmyard at Nistelrode I*. He knew that none of this—his artistic leap, and all that was salubrious in his new life, like Hannes Dortmans's companionship, and presence of his first pet—would have happened without his young forester friend. It was Van den Briel who had persuaded him to come to these appealing surroundings, to eat the healthier food with which he now sustained himself. Besides, not only had Mondrian escaped a life that troubled him and been welcomed into a world that bolstered his spirits, but now, as never before, he was doted on by another person. Van den Briel did his own daily work in his woodland postings, but his main purpose in life was to have Mondrian succeed as a painter and be personally happy. His role enabled Mondrian to find himself.

#

To process and use manure to fertilize crops is about as basic and rudimentary as human action can be. This is cultivation at its simplest. So is the harnessing of wind as a source of power. Mondrian gravitated toward these acts that could be effective anywhere in the world, that depended on materials of no cost, that were simple and ingenious. They were without frills, elementary, and connected to the essential of life.

The characteristic Brabant windmills of the type known as post mills inspired further powerful paintings where the angles and colors of everyday sights and the rhythm of honest work become magical. Used to grind grain, the post mill has a pivoting vertical axle that supports a boxy cabin with a pitched roof. Mondrian rendered these awkward top-heavy structures statuesque and noble. He portrayed them bluntly, applying raw pigment with muscular brushwork; the visible physicality of his painting technique honors that same consummate effectiveness in the mills themselves.

The refugee from Amsterdam had started painting these mills almost as soon as he settled in Uden, and returned to this subject time and again. He admired their tough functionalism, and responded viscerally to the panoply of right angles. Even when they were in dormant mode, Mondrian thrilled to their potential for lively movement and used it to animate his paintings.

The post mills, introduced from France in the early thirteenth century, were the oldest type in the Netherlands.[468] Mondrian painted the finest examples, not just the one in Uden but also the mills in the nearby towns of Veghel and Heeswijk. One of the elements he invariably emphasized was the tail beam, which is a strong plank projecting from the floor of the cabin, through the rear staircase, to the ground. This beam is moved and then

[468] 'De oudste, officieel bekende, windmolen in onze streken wordt gedateerd op 1274 en was een standerdmolen in de stad Haarlem […] Algemeen wordt dat gebied [noordwesten van Frankrijk] dan ook beschouwd als de bakermat van de Westeuropese standerdmolen.' J.H.P. Stroop, *Molenaarstermen en molengeschiedenis*, Gijsbers & Van Loon, Arnhem 1979, p. 5.

anchored in position so that the blades above can rotate into the wind. Like a ship's rudder, it is the brake that is essential for the magisterial blades to capture wind energy in order to grind grain, or less frequently, to pump water. Mondrian savored the power of that solid wooden board, and brought it to life both as a vital machine part and as a decisive diagonal in his compositions.

Studying the way the post mill worked, honing his artistic technique, Mondrian had developed the means to go beyond mere illustration and to portray the ingenuity and logic behind the device's invention. The combined elements of the mill exemplify human intelligence applied to an act dependent on the forces of the universe. The fantastic scale of the blades, the ability of the box-like cabin to pivot on the conical top of the large axle on which it sits, and the functioning of the beam, facilitate an essential stage of the processing of grains into nourishing foods.

Mondrian succeeds in having these strengths and their achievement come alive because, while making his subject recognizable, he takes some surprising liberties. It required his breaking free of the traditional way of doing things to render the energy visible. He presents the horizontals and verticals of the grids in the open blades as wobbly and irregular, indicating them with signs of what they are rather than through meticulous renderings (Fig. 18).[469] While they were carefully pre-meditated, these blades look as if they have been hastily dashed off by a child. Their dancing lines to represent what would be machine-straight in the real world energize the whole with their appearance of spontaneity. The loose brushwork that establishes the background brings out a devil-may-care excitement; slavish reproduction, of the type more traditional artists would have adhered to, would have no such vigor. Mondrian's palpable immersion in the act of loading brushes, thick and thin, with color, and letting them rip, manifest the energy and inventiveness of the mills themselves, and brings their character to life.

#

Mondrian continued to marry his artistic technique to the nature of his subject. In spite of his personal fear of cattle, he relaxed his brush strokes so that his Brabant cows and steers are more gentle and placid than in his previous renditions of them. He left areas of white canvas uncovered to calm the atmosphere all the more. In the animals' large brown or black spots, resembling ink blotches allowed to run freely on that textured support, Mondrian revealed the new freedom which had come to him now that he was more comfortable than when he was painting in tight, over-controlled strokes in Amsterdam the previous year. Mondrian even made the Brabant bulls sympathetic. Looking off to the right, as if a direct gaze might provoke a confrontation, they exist to procreate, not attack.

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[469] A368 *Post Mill at Heeswijk, Rear View*, 1904, oil on canvas, 36,2 x 26 cm, Noordbrabants Museum, 's-Hertogenbosch.

When Mondrian had illustrated *Christ's Heirs* some ten years earlier, he had depicted extreme cruelty and sadism. Now, recoiling from the human aggressiveness and violence he had encountered in Amsterdam, he had reversed course. Having come face to face with something that frightened him, he wanted only to focus on the forces of good in earthly existence.

Fig. 18. Mondrian, *Post Mill at Heeswijk, Rear View*, 1904

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In June of 1904, Albert van den Briel was posted to Lage Mierde, south of Tilburg.[470] This put him fifty kilometers from Uden, too far away for the two men to continue to see each other every night during the week. But on most Saturdays, Van den Briel biked to Uden. Now and then Mondrian would bicycle to meet his friend for dinner at an inn called Het Zwarte Bakje, just north of the village Best, which was a half-way point. Their greatest problem was that Beppie could not be there, the dog had become an important part of their time together. On most weekends though, Van den Briel would bike to Uden and stay with Mondrian and his friendly pet. Van den Briel was the accommodating one, in part because Mondrian did not like the region around Lage Mierde as much as the surroundings of Uden; he made only a single painting there, of an ox stall that could have been most anywhere.[471]

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[470] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 123.
[471] Cf. De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 18-19.

Then Van den Briel was transferred again. This time the forestry service sent him to the area near Boxtel, much closer to Mondrian. They resumed seeing each other as much as possible.

When, in the 1960s, some of the elderly residents of Uden were interviewed about Mondrian, they recall that 'he did little apart from painting from morning until dusk and otherwise kept fairly to himself.' These citizens also recall the 'regular week-end visits of Mr. van den Briel, who seems to have been Mondrian's chief source of human companionship at the time.'[472]

Mondrian, at age thirty-two, planned to stay indefinitely in the companionship of his devoted twenty-two-year-old friend and his amiable dog, with his only other regular contact being with the local farmers and tradespeople. This way of life enabled him to paint with unprecedented zeal. He did not realize that he had failed to shake off all the characters—one in particular—who had made him flee.

IV

The backbone of Mondrian's idyllic life in Uden was the living situation Albert van den Briel had organized for him. Van den Briel had found him not just an idyllic workspace and home in the center of Mondrian's chosen town, but also a perfect arrangement for the artist's care. The Van Zwanenberghs were exceptional landlords. Rather than treat Mondrian just as a lodger, they provided services and hospitality that left him free to paint. Other people might have resented the sole occupant of the left half of the small house they shared with their seven children; the Van Zwanenberghs took the quiet young artist from Amsterdam under their wing and were determined for him to flourish.

Louis van Zwanenbergh assisted Mondrian in the buying of everyday staples like coal and wood. A butcher as well as a cattle dealer, he provided him with meat when he slaughtered it as well as vegetables from his garden. Since he knew how much Mondrian hated gardening as a result of his father forcing it on him when he was a teenager, he also tended the space allotted to Mondrian himself. Doing the weeding and hoeing that would have conjured unhappy memories for the artist, Van Zwanenbergh cultivated the plot so successfully that it provided a bounty of leeks, parsnips, and potatoes.[473]

Mondrian responded to his kind-heartedness only with diffidence. Why did Van Zwanenbergh not fall into the category of new saints like the

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[472] Welsh, *Early career*, p. 66; p. 199.

[473] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1; Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 2)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 2.

Dortmanses? Van den Briel tells us that Mondrian had done all he could to avoid his neighbor's efforts to make contact which attitude arose from Mondrian's anti-Jewish sentiment.[474]

Ever since the arrival of Jews in the Netherlands during the Spanish Inquisition, many Dutch Protestants and Catholics were openly anti-Semitic; still, Van den Briel found Mondrian's prejudice ever since the time when they were in Amsterdam together.[475]

That summer, Mondrian made a drawing of his landlord to be printed on a postcard (Fig. 19).[476] Who published it, or why Van Zwanenbergh's portrait was used, is one of those mysteries I would love to solve. I don't understand the art historians and scholars who have published the image as if it is an ordinary thing, just another art work to reproduce in chronological sequence between landscapes and windmill scenes. They present this nasty anti-Semitic drawing, Mondrian made of his landlord—and made into a commercial postcard!—without remark, as if it was the most normal thing in the world.

Fig. 19. Mondrian, *Louis van Zwanenbergh (Lewieken)*, 1904

[474] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 21. Cf. Letter Van den Briel to Welsh, December 25 1967, RKD #0632, inv.nr. 20.

[475] Although Jews were treated equally in the public domain, 'social anti-Semitism' was widespread. Negative stereotypes of Jews – unfair, rich, smart, cunning, handy, deceitful – were widely accepted. You will find these opinions in diaries of leading intellectuals, folktales and feuilletons in the press and in Sunday sermons. Bart Wallet, *Christendom en antisemitisme. 2000 jaar confrontatie*, Boekencentrum, Utrecht 2017, p. 77.

[476] A352 *Louis van Zwanenbergh (Lewieken)*, 1904.

Van Zwanenbergh's wife was so offended by the image that she bought and destroyed all the cards she could put her hands on. One known example of the card escaped her campaign, however. It is dreadful. Mondrian depicted his landlord with a caricature of the type that proliferated in right wing French newspapers at the time of the Dreyfus trial. His subject has the stereotypical hooked nose and furrowed brow, and a bald spot on his head in the shape of a yarmulke. Adding insult to injury, Mondrian has written over his landlord's face, "Lewieken." Robert Welsh tells us that in the old Brabant lingo, this was the term for a man who purchases swine for slaughter.[477] It is a brutal barb. Even if it is possible that on the odd occasion he traded in pigs, Van Zwanenbergh was a cattle dealer. Given that kosher laws prohibit the eating of pork, the word vilified a man who was the clichéd image of an old Jew by putting him in the business of selling pig meat. The expression on Van Zwanenbergh's miserable face suggests that since, as a Jew, he valued commerce and money matter more than anything else, he was willing to violate his religious tradition as long as it is lucrative to do so, but was ashamed. Still, money first.

#

In his second unpublished text about Mondrian, Van den Briel takes off from the subject of Mondrian and Van Zwanenbergh to discussing the artist and Salomon Slijper, a man who would collect Mondrian's work and become one of his greatest patrons: 'M had a slightly Jewish appearance, which was more pronounced at some times than others. There is no evidence of any Jewish elements in his family. But also the appearance of his mother and sister gave some suggestion of Jewish ancestry, although there are no traces of that to be found in the genealogy. What is remarkable is that M had a clear dislike of Jews. For instance, he never got friendly with his landlord and neighbor, who was a Jew, and also a cattle dealer, who frequently gave M a portion of meat when he slaughtered a lamb on his own behalf. He also grew some vegetables in the garden, when it became clear that M was doing practically nothing with that plot of land. The man was very forthcoming, but they never became friends, which was in sharp contrast to the social interaction among the farmers of Nistelrode.'

#

There was one local character who reminded Mondrian of his father. Hannes Kranenbroek was living in Nistelrode and was sixty-seven years old when Mondrian moved to Uden. He was a bit contentious, an independent outsider, and Mondrian regularly made the short journey to visit him. Kranenbroek, everyone knew, was in conflict with the local pastor, Van Ulft. The man, who lived in a large farmhouse, was a bachelor, and the pastor urged him that, since he had neither a wife nor children, he should leave his legacy to the church. Since Kranenbroek refused, most everyone in the community treated him as an alien. Mondrian, meanwhile, visited frequently,

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[477] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 291.

doing five paintings in the summer of 1904 of Kranenbroek's house—exterior as well as interior—and continuing to visit on occasional evenings even when he was no longer making paintings of it. He told Van den Briel that the older man made him think of Pieter Mondriaan: a silimarity that made him continue to go back kindly.[478]

#

Van Zwanenbergh liked his artist tenant regardless, and so did the local farmers, linen weavers, and clog makers, even if he was so clearly not one of them. And he preferred to be with them than with the doctor and pastor, who were more his social equals.

Van den Briel describes Mondrian's transformation in the company of these laborers as the sort of metamorphosis that occurs in a Tolstoy's story where a jaded urbanite is restored by hunters and peasants: The sincerity of the people he associated with in Nistelrode, Vorstenbosch and Dinther, the fact that they spoke without ambiguity, came as a relief to Mondrian after the artificiality of the world he had known in Amsterdam. The farming community of Brabant earned from him the somewhat idealized comment: 'if there is any wickedness here, it was imported from elsewhere.'[479]

It was the same faith Henriëtte Hendrix had detected in Mondrian's paintings of wide-eyed little girls. The artist idealized what he perceived as a state of unblemished innocence.

In Brabant he could realize human relationships without conflict. He could be part of a community without feeling used or threatened; there were no demands on him; no one was judging him conspicuously, or declaring him right or wrong. The people with whom he enjoyed spending time did not have his same interests, and may never have traveled more than an hour by horse cart from their homes; those differences suited him. They did not occupy his mind, or impose on his essential solitude, yet they offered the agreeable smiles and the sympathetic hellos he needed.

These guileless farmers and shop owners were so accepting and gracious that Mondrian was content as never before, and even adapted to local habits of his own volition. He went so far in his desire to fit in that he had a suit tailor-made in the local style; the top was 'a black-brown ribbed Manchester, closed at the neck'—identical to what his new acquaintances wore.[480] To resemble the clean-cut men around him more than Amsterdam's anarchists or bohemian artistic types, he trimmed his beard and mustache all the more meticulously, and neatly parted and combed his straight hair. Van den Briel

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[478] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 22.
[479] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.
[480] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 22.

proudly witnessed the man known as 'Piet the painter' turn into a "regular guy", increasingly at home with the local farmers and millers.[481]

#

Hannes and Grada Dortmans' kitchen served as a modest café giving simple food and drink to locals and passers-by. Mondrian kept up his habit of eating quantities of those ham sandwiches made with fresh bread for which the flour had been milled from local grains and the ham came from pigs nearby. 'Hannesje' would never allow Mondrian to pay. Although he and Grada barely made ends meet, either from their farm income or the mark-up on the local beer or Dutch gin their paying customers drank, they knew that Mondrian's finances were so tenuous that they would not consider taking his money. It was a level of generosity unprecedented in Mondrian's life.

This is the first time we ever have an impression that Mondrian could relax with other people. With his brothers he was the one who stayed inside protecting his eyes. At Simon Maris's, he was the one standing apart from everyone else, holding forth. If he ever caroused with other art students or the Wormser brothers, we never hear about it. But in that same farmhouse which he and Van den Briel had wandered into during Mondrian's initial visit to Brabant the previous July, he came to life in a new way. As he was much younger than Hannes and Grada Dortmans, they treated him as if they were the parents and he a child they were thrilled to see come home.[482] Their warm welcome transformed him.

Mondrian never knew the extent to which Hannes Dortmans had worried about him when he arrived to live in the region after renouncing his Amsterdam life. The farmer told Van den Briel that at the start of his stay in Uden, Mondrian was almost ceaselessly glum, and brought death into the conversation so persistently that both the Dortmanses were desperately worried. They struggled to figure out how to get him to shift focus. Their solution was to give their new friend a crucifix blessed by the bishop of 's-Hertogenbosch.[483]

Mondrian immediately hung the cross in his home in the Van Zwanenbergh's house. Christ's death had little meaning for him, but the Dortmanses' kindness was so life-altering that, years later, he would put the crucifix on the wall of his Paris studio. After World War I, once his abstract work began to sell, Mondrian would manage, even when he had no extra money, to send the Dortmanses tobacco, cigars, and food delicacies. By then, the Dortmanses had children, for whom Mondrian would include gifts in the parcels.

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[481] Van den Briel, *'Mondriaans persoonlijkheid' (versie 1)*, in: RKD #0632, inv. nr. 1.

[482] Letter Albert van den Briel to Harthoorn, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 23.

[483] Albert van den Briel to Welsh, *6e mededeling*, in: RKD #0632 inv.nr. 9.

He credited these people with his restoration from the edge of disaster. Mondrian told Albert van den Briel quite simply that, with Hannes Dortmans and his wife, 'he was cured.'[484]

#

Of what did Mondrian consider himself "cured"?

Something even more painful to him than the complications of undesirable friends or his disappointment with social activism had plagued him. It had been pernicious. Yet all that was required to treat it was a few months of playing cards and eating simple hearty food with devout Catholic farmers. His feeling of emotional and physical safety, in a place where no questions were asked, was the most effective medicine.

J.M. Harthoorn, a Mondrian collector who did intense research on the artist's life, confirms that the time in Brabant did not just allow Mondrian to 'recover some stability' and 'rekindle his spirits,' but that is was specifically Hannes Dortmans and his wife who 'set him free from his black melancholy.'[485] Harthoorn, while an obscure figure in the field of Mondrian scholarship, is a valuable source. Thirty years younger than Mondrian, he was a chemist, and became financially successful with both a sugar factory and a tobacco plantation in Indonesia, formerly a Dutch colony. In the early 1960s, by which time he had bought some fine work by Mondrian, he became keenly interested in the artist's life. He sought out Albert van den Briel, and he and Van den Briel began to meet once a week to go to the sites where Mondrian had worked in Brabant. Harthoorn was determined to write a biography of Mondrian; while he never actually did so, he wrote, in 1980, an insightful essay about the artist. Having himself been raised in the Reformed Church of the Netherlands—and being, clearly, a perceptive and empathic person—Harthoorn was well-equipped to understand some of the fundamental issues for Mondrian, especially after meeting the key players in Brabant.

Van den Briel emphasized to Harthoorn the importance of Hannes Dortmans's role in Mondrian's life. The farmer allowed that he had become deeply worried during Mondrian's extreme darkness during his 'periods of dejection' when he was so preoccupied with death.[486] Beyond giving Mondrian the crucifix, Dortmans taught Mondrian the essential tenets of Roman Catholicism. Mondrian did not convert, but, Harthoorn tells us, Dortman's instruction—delivered, it became clear, with a kindness and patience that were the diametrical opposite of Pieter Mondriaan's absolutism—gave Mondrian renewed hope and inspiration to keep living. What moved Mondrian above all was the 'philosophy on sin. He became

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[484] Letter Albert van den Briel to Harthoorn, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 23.
[485] J.M. Harthoorn, *Mondrian's creative realism*, Uitgeverij tableau, Mijdrecht 1980, p. 6-7.
[486] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 7.

convinced that, however overwhelming a sense of sin and guilt may be, there is always room for God's remission which allows man to start a new, reborn life.'[487]

It was the reverse approach from the insistence on lifelong guilt fundamental to Calvinism. Harthoorn tells us that according to the Calvinist doctrine, the sins of man are a lifelong burden, with forgiveness and redemption only being possible after death, whereas in the Roman Catholic teaching there is room for renewal and rebirth. Spiritual renewal and transcendence of the old situation is therefore a constant possibility.[488]

One hears yet again about what Mondrian ate when Dortmans calmly elucidated the Catholic idea of redemption and forgiveness for one sins in front of a warm fire in the pleasant cottage in the countryside. The detail of the country bread made by Dortmans's warm and outgoing wife and the delicious home-cured ham was of such importance to Mondrian that it gets mentioned time and again and is essential to every description of these encounters. The sandwich seems to have been right up there with Catholic redemption in lifting the anguished, guilt-ridden artist from his internal morass to a state of hope and exaltation.

Until Dortmans changed the way the thirty-two-year-old artist regarded himself, and the farmer and his wife gave him that sacramental meal, Mondrian believed, because of something in the recent past, that he faced a lifetime of guilt for which the only solution was suffering and self-punishment.

#

It was not just that Mondrian might now forgive himself for something in his past. Harthoorn points out that, besides alleviating his misery and enabling him to move forward, the Dortmanses liberated Mondrian to feel an optimism and joy that would pertain to his life forever after. Harthoorn paraphrases Mondrian's version of what he took to heart with the farmers in Brabant: 'It is always possible to spiritually renew oneself and free oneself from one's own seemingly fixed, established situation in life.'[489]

Harthoorn writes that 'this eternal trend of renewal' to which Mondrian was converted into believing by Hannes Dortmans became 'vitally important' to the artist.[490] Reading Harthoorn's synopsis of Mondrian's belief in psychological and emotional evolution and in spiritual rebirth, our thoughts jump to the glistening white compositions of the 1920s. Their ever-vibrating gridwork of black, and the pulse of their reds, yellows, and blues, offer all of us entry into an uplifting and unencumbered universe. Mondrian's apotheosis sparked a new form of art which enables all who view it to feel reborn as well.

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[487] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 7.
[488] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 7.
[489] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 7.
[490] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 7.

V

Two decades after Mondrian's death, when Van den Briel and Harthoorn were corresponding, and they discussed the life-changing, possibly life-saving, significance to Mondrian of the idea of the absolution of one's sins, as Mondrian first discovered it in that same cottage in Brabant where they were now sitting, Van den Briel reminisced about the early days of his and Mondrian's friendship, when they first met in Amsterdam about four years prior to the move to this bucolic region. Van den Briel was impressed, and in turn so was Harthoorn, by how Mondrian 'managed, to a certain extent, to detach himself from the rigidly protestant environment in which he had grown up.'[491] Having been raised in a similar situation, even if his own father was not as absolute a Calvinist as Pieter Mondriaan, Harthoorn knew the rarity of the open-mindedness and curiosity with which Mondrian had achieved his self-liberation.

Van den Briel described to the Mondrian researcher a pivotal event which occurred shortly after he and Mondrian had met in Amsterdam. The twenty-eight-year-old artist and nineteen-year-old medical student had already begun to see each other every afternoon. One day, however, Van den Briel told Mondrian that henceforth he would be unable to visit the artist in his studio on 'one particular afternoon in the week.'[492] This was, he explained, because he would be attending a class with Reverend Hugenholtz Sr. at the Vrije Gemeente. Van den Briel, expecting Mondrian to disapprove, was surprised when Mondrian immediately voiced his admiration for Hugenholtz. The minister, while Christian, gave his students instruction in Buddhism, the teachings of Lao Tzu, and other religious faiths and philosophy. Mondrian's openness to what was considered a 'strong humanitarian' viewpoint was a happy violation of the tenets of his upbringing.[493] That willingness to chuck tradition was a complete departure from the values enforced by Pieter Mondriaan.

#

It was with that knowledge of Mondrian's openmindedness and receptivity that Van den Briel had proposed to this friend he admired so much that he move to Brabant. But he had not imagined the extent to which Mondrian would flourish. The artist's new zeal for life that spring was manifest not just in the prodigious energy he put into the act of painting, but in a gregariousness that was rare for him. He sent Van den Briel's mother a postcard wishing her a happy birthday.[494] In May he submitted *The Hearth*, a rendering of the inside of Hannes and Grada Dortmans's house, to the St.

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[491] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 8.
[492] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 8.
[493] Harthoorn, *Creative realism*, p. 8.
[494] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 23.

Lucas exhibition.[495] It betrayed an affection, and a domestic joyfulness that was almost bubbly, new to Mondrian's work.

As the warm weather started to hit southern Netherlands in the spring of 1904, all of Mondrian's paintings manifest his new freedom. The liberated Mondrian was loosening up; his trees were livelier, their branchwork more poetic, and the farm buildings were turning into even broader planes of smoothy applied color. The viewer breathes more easily looking at these pictures than at the tighter composites of fussy brushwork Mondrian had been making in Amsterdam a year earlier.

A brilliant sunlight infused most of the recent paintings. There had been hints of such breakthroughs in the preceding years, the occasional watercolor or canvas with a burst of spirit and charge of energy, but more often than not, the canvases Mondrian made before moving were dour and murky. Now a sheer intoxication with being alive, and a vision of the splendors of the universe, was present in Mondrian's work as never before.

VI

Then calamity struck.

The summer of 1904 was scorchingly hot and dry. Brabant experienced the most desert-like conditions on record, with the water level of the Meuse exceptionally low.[496] Anyone who could flocked to the countryside to avoid the heat of the city. The Tram Station, a small hotel in Uden which had a café on the ground floor and was next door to Mondrian's digs in the Zwanenbergh's house, was filled to capacity with these escapees.

Mondrian was not thrilled when some of the people he knew from the Theosophy Society booked into the hotel. Soon enough, though, he realized that they would interrupt his painting; it was fine to have these people nextdoor as long as they recognized the sanctity of his painting.[497] Then, like a bolt out of the blue, a man and a woman from his old anarchist group barged into his studio when he was hard at work painting.

They, too, were staying at the Tram Station. He asked them not to interrupt him again, but the following day they again came unannounced.

Mondrian's peace was shattered. When, a few hours after the second intrusion, Van den Briel showed up for the weekend, Mondrian told him what had happened and said that he had again lost his ability to paint. Visibly tortured, Mondrian spilled out the reason he was so upset. He told Van den

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[495] A355 *De Herd (The Home): Hannes van Nistelrode at His Pot Stove*, 1904, private collection.
[496] *Graafsche Courant* July 20 1904, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 23.
[497] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 23-24.

Briel that, in Amsterdam the previous spring, this same man had spread rumors that he and Mondrian were having a homosexual relationship.[498]

This—the gossip, if not the fact itself—was apparently the reason Amsterdam had become so unbearable to Mondrian that he could no longer work there. It was also presumably the "other issue" in Mondrian's urgent letter—the problem about which Van den Briel coyly refused to be more specific.

Writing about this, Van den Briel becomes heated up. He felt he could not leave the subsequent events, and the related issues, out of his account for Harthoorn, but they troubled Mondrian's friend in many ways, and made him highly defensive. Yet in the way that Van den Briel arrived ahead of schedule for one of their usual weekends together, it was as if he had a premonition of what would ensue. 'I arrived in Uden (on a Saturday?) much earlier than usual, I think it was already on the previous day, and found M. looking very downhearted. There were visitors (lodged in the tram-stop which also served as hotel or inn, as in Nistelrode, especially for cattle traders at that time): a young woman and a "gentleman." The girl was a brainless goose, and the "gentleman" a seedy-looking individual, although that may be an exaggeration – at any rate not a upstanding fellow, and surely a drinker – such things attract attention in an environment of heath and woods. Beppie took a dislike to him, and growled from time to time. The man was a homosexual, so M. told me later. I may add here that M. is capable of strong, warm friendships, which may last a lifetime, but that he never gave the least intimation of homosexual leanings. (I am not so sure about one of his brothers in this respect). If, like me, one is chosen to strike up a true, healthy, heartfelt friendship with a worthwhile person, one senses the extent thereof very clearly. M. told me that the fellow had already bothered him in Amsterdam, and that he [the fellow] had been told where to find him by the young woman accompanying him. That was precisely the kind of thing that had upset M. in the past. M. was very nervous, (embarrassed about his friends!), but most of all he was dismayed about being kept from his work by those 2 visitors.'[499]

Mondrian at the time was working with great determination on a painting of a cow lying down in the stable. He was irked, he told Van den Briel, that the gossip-monger and his girlfriend had walked into his studio uninvited at a moment when he was concentrating on the canvas and making great progress. While he mentioned to Van den Briel that in Amsterdam the man had said that he and Mondrian were lovers, Mondrian maintained that it was the intrusion on his work, more than the issue of his rumored homosexuality, that upset him.

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[498] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 74.

[499] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 74.

Van den Briel initially declined to intervene. But by Saturday afternoon, seeing how distraught Mondrian was, he decided that the following day he would take action to put a stop to the encounters that were destroying the artist and causing his plunge into the darkness that had been devouring him just over a year earlier during that initial visit to Brabant.

#

Van den Briel knew that in the late morning on Sunday most of the local people were at mass. This would be the perfect time to confront the man from Amsterdam in the café, since none of the people Mondrian knew in Uden, except for the bartender, would be there to witness it. Van den Briel was confident that, based on Mondrian's description, the man would already be drinking. He went to the café.

'Come with me, I need to talk to you,' the twenty-three-year-old forester instructed the visitor from Amsterdam.[500]

Van den Briel had two objectives. He wanted Mondrian to paint undisturbed, and he was determined to prevent the man from gossiping in Uden. The farmers and shopkeepers would probably have ostracized Mondrian if they thought he had even a slight taint of homosexuality.

The man did not budge. Rather, sitting on his bar tool, he began to shout obscenities at Mondrian's young friend. Van den Briel grabbed him by the collar and left arm and pulled him through the alleyway between the café and the house where Mondrian was staying. He forced the man into 'the garden at the back of the house, and told him to get the hell out of Uden.'[501]

The man tried to kick Van den Briel. Van den Briel dodged his assailant's foot, punched him between the eyes, and knocked him out. Van Zwanenbergh heard the ruckus and ran to the scene.

While Mondrian looked on, Van den Briel and Van Zwanenbergh poured water on the man lying on the ground until he revived. In a letter to J.M. Harthoorn, Van den Briel, proud to be Mondrian's protector, reported on what happened once the man had revived sufficiently to understand what was going on. 'And I told him, in front of Zwanenberg, what was what: get out of here, Monday morning early, and don't come back, or else -. And stay indoors on Sunday, don't visit M., and keep out of my sight.'[502]

Van den Briel knew his work was not done, however. 'The young woman came next. Treated her far more mildly, even amicably, although she looked daggers at me, and treated me with scorn. Told them both to go away and never come back. Warned them both. And that was that. I dare say they took me for a homosexual myself, but that was a risk I had to take. M. had

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[500] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 75.
[501] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 75.
[502] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 75.

got himself into a very awkward situation, and I was afraid all the good it had done him to be in Brabant would be undone. I believe I had no choice. And I was angry. Which is also an excuse. The man came from a good family, with an old surname, and money. A tragic case, no doubt about it. A wasted life, sadly. But I was there for M., and had to take action if he was unable to. M. resented this a bit at first, and referred to his 'guests'. But we talked it all over, including the situation of last year and his so-called 'crisis', and in the end he said I was right. He actually smiled when he heard Zwanenberg's account of it afterwards. When I talked with Zwanenberg again later, he said it was just as well that they had left, or M.'s reputation in Uden would have suffered.'[503]

Zwanenbergh told Van den Briel that the man and woman from Amsterdam had in fact already gossiped about Mondrian and managed to sully his reputation in Uden, but that once they were out of town the matter would no longer be discussed. Mondrian's landlord, eager to protect his tenant, thanked Van den Briel profusely for having sent the intruders packing.

#

It seems likely that the man who claimed to have had a sexual relationship with Mondrian was telling the truth; why else, in the presense of his female companion, would he have made the claim? And Van den Briel's refutation of it is so adamant and repetitive that it rings false. Beyond that, even if Van den Briel and Mondrian did not themselves actually have a physical relationship, there is a powerful homo-erotic undertone to the way these two men, one thirty-one years old, the other twenty-two, perpetually hustled back and forth to see one another at least once every three days—in a time period when there is no hint whatsoever of a woman's presence in either of their lives—we know about the dog, the neighbors, the landlord; if there had been any form of girlfriend, wouldn't she have been mentioned? I believe that what was plaguing Mondrian when Hannes Dortmans comforted him by proposing the Catholic absolution of his sins, as opposed to the eternal damnation intrinsic to Calvinism, was a homosexual relationship.

The standards and notions of morality with which Mondrian had been raised, would have made homosexuality a sin for which he would suffer for the rest of his life. The tenets of neo-Calvinism in his parents' home are the same set of beliefs familiar today in the statements of people like Michelle Bachmann.[504] When Mondrian in his initial conversations with Hannes Dortmans had been obsessed with death, it may well have been because he

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[503] Letter Van den Briel to Harthoorn (no date), as published in: Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 75.

[504] Michelle Bachmann (1956) is an American Republican politician, former member of the United States House of Representatives. She publicly referred to homosexuality as 'sexual dysfunction' and 'sexual identity disorders'.

could not imagine any other way out from his feeling of guilt. What plagued him was probably a profound shame associated with his sexuality and self-imposed anguish because of his experience with the man who then came to Uden that summer.

My hunch is that he probably had all sorts of related feelings toward Van den Briel as well. Even if they did not act on them, they had a form of unconsummated, undisclosed love affair.

VII

The visit from the man who claimed to have been Mondrian's lover was not the only disruption to the artist's idyll in Brabant. His dream of a kind and supportive world was further shattered a couple of months after that first intrusion.

All year long, Piet C.L.J. Raymakers, a wine merchant from Eindhoven, had collected Mondrian's work. Ever since Mondrian arrived in Uden, Raymakers had been an emotional and financial mainstay. The vintner visited him regularly, often leaving with a new purchase under his arm; he had a particular penchant for the best canvases of cows lying down.[505]

Mondrian and Van den Briel both assumed that Raymakers was buying these works for his private collection. Then, in the fall of 1904, they discovered he was reselling them at a profit. Mondrian was deeply upset by the deception. He felt betrayed by the person he thought was acquiring his new work only out of love for it. He was perfectly comfortable when galleries or art dealers commercialized his work and sold it as an honest business venture, but he was disgusted to be duped.

Besides, Mondrian would have charged more if he knew that Raymakers was reselling the pictures at higher prices rather than buying them to look at. He could have used the percentage Raymakers was skimming for himself. What the artist was earning from selling paintings to the wine merchant and a second collector from the nearby city of Helmond, the only other person to buy his art that year, was not enough to cover even his modest living expenses. As the end of 1904 approached, Mondrian had depleted the funds he had set aside for his first year in Brabant.

He realized that he could no longer survive financially without the support system he had developed in Amsterdam. Mondrian needed the collectors and patrons who he knew through Calvinist circles if he was to survive as an artist.[506] Besides, even as his painting improved, the new work was not being seen by enough people now that he could not easily exhibit it.

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[505] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 24-25.
[506] Albert van den Briel to Welsh, *6e mededeling*, in: RKD #0632 inv.nr. 9.

The past had come back to haunt him; the reality of finances was re-emerging. Everything that had appeared to be a solution was starting to wear thin. Moreover, Mondrian was growing tired of rural life, especially as winter was setting in. He probably also realized that what he had fled was neither inescapable nor as significant as he feared. In mid-December, Mondrian told Van den Briel he 'needed the tension and friction that were there in the big city.'[507] It was moving back to Amsterdam.

[507] Albert van den Briel, as quoted in: De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 26.

Back to Amsterdam

I

Again Mondrian dismantled his household. The process of weeding out his possessions and emptying a home never bothered him or took a long time. A Belgian collector offered to buy, as a group, some of the paintings Mondrian had made over the year in Brabant, although here there was bargain involved; the buyer wanted a substantially discounted price per picture since he was buying such a lot of them. Mondrian would have liked more money, but he was never particulary attached to his own work once he had finished it to his satisfaction, and, impatient to move on, accepted the deal.[508]

Then he packed up his few remaining canvases and the few possessions about which he cared, which were mostly his acquisitions from the year away. Even as he divested himself of his own artwork for a modest amount of cash, and eagerly prepared to rejoin society, Mondrian clung to some mementoes of his self-imposed exile as if they would assure the continuity of his well-being once he returned to the city. He was taking back to Amsterdam the large cast iron stove that Van den Briel had given him, a simple country side chair, and copper candle sticks. In addition, since Beppie was to be part of his new life, he had the dog's copper bowl. He also kept his coffee boiler, the cups he had bought in Uden, and a red and yellow copper tobacco box in typical Brabant style. He was also taking an enormous sack of potatoes that Van Zwanenbergh had grown for him in the back garden, and some farewell gifts from local farmers, including a wooden walking stick an Uden neighbor had carved for him to carry from his old life into his future one.[509] All that remained to assemble were his clothes and his art supplies. He meticulously organized his palette and paints and brushes at the last moment, so that he could paint right up until the time he left. Once they were in boxes, he was set to go.

On Friday, January 7, 1905, Mondrian's new contingent of friends loaded all of this material on horse carts for the journey from Uden to Veghel. There, Mondrian's worldly goods went onto a cargo boat that took them on a canal to 's-Hertogenbosch, while Mondrian took the tram. At 's-Hertogenbosch, he transferred them to another boat that would make its way up to the docks of Amsterdam, while Mondrian took the train. It was

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[508] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 26.

[509] Van den Briel, *Mondriaan's persoonlijkheid (versie 2)*, RKD #0632, inv.nr 2; De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 26.

all easy enough; he would not resume where he had left off, but would be back in Amsterdam as a man reborn.[510]

#

The Dutch government at the end of the nineteenth and start of the twentieth centuries diligently tracked everyone who was in the country. Residents were required to register themselves, citing their professions. Whenever they moved, even if it was from one address to another in the same town, they had to report their current location. Mondrian himself never held on to documents like lease agreements or receipts for rent payment, but the official records have enabled scholars to make a roadmap of the artist's life during the years following his return to Amsterdam from Brabant. He perpetually changed digs—even though he had Beppie and his iron stove and copper utensils with him, was something of a vagabond—but we almost always know when he was at what address.

Having left Uden on January 27, Mondrian did not, however, initially register anywhere. He was too broke to make a deposit on a space of his own until he had first earned some money by giving art lessons, organizing some portrait commissions and making copies with partial payment up front.[511] He stayed in other people's flats for his first three and half weeks in the city. We presume that it was either his brothers or Simon Maris who took him in. Then, on February 22, he rented space in the attic of the St. Lucas building at Rembrandtplein 10.[512]

A new ally made this possible. Albert Hulshoff Pol, eleven years Mondrian's junior, was a painter and fellow member of Arti et Amicitiae.[513] He commandeered his uncle, D.J. Hulshoff Pol, an Amsterdam health official, and his wife to study painting with Mondrian and to commission him to make portraits of their sons (Fig. 20).[514]

The Hulshoff Pol brothers posed for Mondrian during several sittings, but Mondrian depended mainly on photographs of them to do the paintings. His first work after returning to Amsterdam, they were hardly triumphant. Mondrian painted them as if both he and his subjects were in a slavish trance. These prosaic images could well serve as advertisements for a men's haberdashery, or perhaps for the Mondrian family's hairdressing establishment back in The Hague; the Hulshoff Pols emerge as well-heeled young men in proper attire, totally without personality, too clean-cut and virtuous to be true. For now, Mondrian was simply coasting artistically. These commissions he took in order to have enough money to live on his

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[510] De Mooij, *Brabant*, p. 26.

[511] February 15 1905: Mondrian is granted permission to copy at the Rijksmuseum a painting by Nicolaas Maes, *Het Gebed zonder Eind*. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 124.

[512] Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers*, p. 49.

[513] Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 321.

[514] A275 *D.J. Hulshoff Pol*, 1905, Gemeentemuseum; A276 *J.P.G. Hulshoff Pol*, 1905, Gemeentemuseum.

own were technically adequate, but little more. Mondrian had made the decision to leave his life in the countryside out of duress, and he had lost both the lightness of touch and the warm feeling of contentment that infused the canvases of cows and windmills he had been making only a few months earlier.

Fig. 20 Mondrian, *Portraits of D.J. Hulshoff Pol & J.P.G. Hulshoff Pol*, 1905

Mondrian was sufficiently capable to make some money with these commissioned pictures, but not an ounce of emotion comes through. With his anodyne style, he was masking his anxiety over being back in the place he had fled scarcely more than a year earlier. The dry verisimilitude of the Hulshoff Pol portraits was more suitable when he got himself hired to make bacteriological drawings for Professor Van Calcar, a lecturer at Leiden University. The purpose of these illustrations was to teach the use of the microscope.[515] Looking through a microscope himself, Mondrian was given the task of showing bacteria enlarged by the power of thirty, so that the person using the tool would have an idea of what to expect using it.

[515] Mondrian mentiones these bacteriological drawings in the *Knickerbocker Weekly* interview with Jay Bradley: 'To make a living I did many kinds of work – bacteriological drawings used for textbooks', Bradley, *Knickerbocker Weekly*, p. 18. According to Henkels it started in 1905, see: Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 157. Cf. Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 51. According to Bax, Mondrian gave lessons to Van Calcars wife, see: Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 31.

Unlike the portraits, these pictures required emotional distance; in fact, they would have been ill served by visible feeling. Mondrian was becoming increasingly precise and methodical, and the necessity of representing reality magnified aided him to advance his technical skills. He had the rare ability to execute his difficult task with legerdemain, acquiring a mastery of his craft that would in time make a lot possible. And even though his subject might have felt inglorious, bacteria, being everywhere, having no connection to language or culture, belonged to all of life and were, significantly, universal.

#

During the year Mondrian had been in Brabant, several of the Dutch artists had moved in new directions. Kees van Dongen—a Dutch artist who had moved to Paris and became part of the group of painters who in 1905 would be labeled the "Fauves," or "wild beasts"—was being lambasted by many and touted by a few for his breakthrough use of color and radical approach to picture space.[516] Other avant-garde painters were taking totally new approaches to the concept of representation, and conspiculously shunning the traditional techniques of the Hague School and earlier Dutch art. At first, Mondrian scarcely gave a nod to the new developments. Painting portraits in a clinical style and executing meticulous drawings of bacteria, he was doing what was tried and true. Even in the still-lifes and landscapes he was painting only for himself rather than on commission, he stayed on a conservative course.

Then, about a year after his return to Amsterdam, Mondrian let loose. Even though he was again living in the center of the city, he returned to the reverence for pure nature that had fueled him in Brabant. It unleashed a force that he had repressed during his time of readjustment to Amsterdam. Developing a technique that was entirely his own, Mondrian painted scenes he remembered from the Uden region or the locales to which he now made daytrips from the city. He dashed off a flurry of small canvases. They captured sunshine pouring through bare branches, moonlight bouncing off sloping barn roofs, golden sunsets penetrating the clouds over a pond in which they are reflected, and the pink-tinged sky brightening the blades of a windmill. Light—immaterial, essential to the act of seeing, exhilarating to the human psyche—was his elixir. Regardless of the attempts of science to make it a comprehensible phenomenon, it was ultimately inexplicable, and Mondrian was in its thrall.

Even though he would claim the contrary, this was the vision and enthusiasm that define Romanticism. Mondrian's many versions of "evening" and "night" in 1906-7 are the painted equivalents of some of Wordsworth's poetry. Their subject matter is similar to that of Frits

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[516] Cf. Anita Hopmans, 'Kees van Dongen. Sociaal engagement en sensuele vrouwen in Montmartre', in: Mayken Jonkman (red.), *Nederlanders in Parijs 1789-1914*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2017, p. 209-216.

Mondriaan and other Hague School painters, but their emotional fervor sets them apart. They are charged with Mondrian's redolent spiritualism, his unabashed wish to celebrate not only sunshine but the power of color and the wonder of air. In his year away, Mondrian's enthusiasm for the givens of earthly existence had acquired new depth; now, after a period of resettling and taking stock, he made it his task to convey the powerful beauty that he imagined as well as the one he saw all around him.

Mondrian, meanwhile, presented a face to the world that had nothing to do with the furies that possessed him. He painted with abandon, and at the same time willingly adhered to the constraints and behavioral norms of Dutch bourgeois existence. He struck almost everyone who met him as a reticent. His friends two years earlier had included anarchists; now he conducted himself as a rule-abiding citizen, and preferred the company of others of similar comportment. His fellow congregants at church thought of him as one of their same time. He was, however, to an exceptional extreme, in love with life. What was not evident in his persona revealed itself in his art.

Natural growth intoxicated Mondrian much as light did. His passion in particular for trees, well as for the experience of seeing them, infuses a group of extraordinary sketches he made in that second year in Amsterdam. Plant growth, cloud formation, the flow of streams and rivers: these and other manifestations of nature suffused Mondrian.

II

After a year and a half back in the city, Mondrian realized that life in Amsterdam no longer suited him. Starting in the fall of 1906, he again exiled himself to the countryside. This time, too, he technically stayed on his own, but again he had moved under the aegis of a young man who was regularly in his company, Albert Hulshoff Pol. The year or so Mondrian spent in these circumstances is the most difficult time period in the artist's life to reconstruct.

When he moved away from Amsterdam this second time, he headed due east to the small village of Saasveld, near Oele. Close to the German border, it was not far from Winterswijk, which lay directly to the south. Hulshoff Pol arranged his travel and all of the arrangements about where he would live. Hulshoff Pol, however, unlike Van den Briel, never wrote about Mondrian, or discussed him with others—which is why far less is known about his episode in the artist's life than about the time in Brabant.[517] The paintings from that time period tell a lot, though. In his art, Mondrian took a fantastic leap forward.

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[517] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 369.

The little we know about Albert Hulshoff Pol is that until then he had been among the friends with whom Mondrian would leave Amsterdam for jaunts to paint on the Gein River, but he never made a mark as a painter. Since Mondrian's return from Brabant, it had, of course, been Hulshoff Pol who had gotten Mondrian on his feet by having him give art lessons to his aunt and uncle and paint those portraits of his cousins. His father, W. Hulshoff Pol, was a textile manufacturer in Hengelo, not far from Saasveld. The farmhouse, called "De Waarbeek," where Mondrian moved that autumn was the businessman's pied-à-terre in the region, a new structure in an old farm complex, both functional and charming. W. Hulshoff Pol hardly ever went there himself and turned a part of the house into a huge studio for his son. He had Mondrian use it.[518] Albert Hulshoff Pol was often on the scene as well, but we don't know where he stayed.

Mondrian's scholars do not concur on how long the artist lived this way. Henkels has the artist in Saasveld 'from autumn of 1906 until at the summer of 1907.'[519] The 2011 *Centre Pompidou catalogue* simply says Mondrian was there for "hiver" of 1906-1907. Welsh does not have him there at all, but says there was 'compelling evidence that Mondrian worked in *Twente* during the fall of 1906.'[520] Seuphor allows that he 'was unable to determine how long he stayed at Oele,' but that it was before 1908.[521] Since Mondrian periodically returned to Amsterdam, where he saw friends and attended exhibitions, the precise dates and time period are difficult to establish; had he been totally absent from events in the city, it would be clearer. But based on the art Mondrian made in the region and dated precisely, I think the total time period is underestimated by everyone other than Henkels, and was at least a year.

The move had an even more dramatic effect on Mondrian's paintings than had his retreat to Brabant. The region around Oele was one of the poorest in the Netherlands, its farms completely backwards. Some of those farms were so simple, and their owners so poor, that the peasants and cattle lived together in a single room. Mondrian did not dwell on local life—Seuphor tells us he had a distinct aversion to the indigenous building style and the pointed roofs of the houses—but he was riveted to the woods in the region, which had oak trees that were hundred of years old, as well as to the heather.[522] He made breakthrough drawings and paintings of them. This time period in the eastern part of the Netherlands was an apotheosis.

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[518] Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 321-323.
[519] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 195.
[520] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 126.
[521] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 64.
[522] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 64.

Fig. 21. Mondrian, *Pine Woods near Oele*, c. 1906

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Once he was settled in the farmhouse and brand new studio, with his young patron living either nearby or with him and seeing to it that he had everything he needed, Mondrian was in flying form. He began to work in a large format, making preliminary drawings and oil sketches of the same size as the final work. His art immediately became freer than even the more spirited of his recent Amsterdam pictures. Mondrian drew and painted trees and clouds broadly, almost as abstract planes, and eliminated details. *Pine Woods near Oele* (Fig. 21), a crayon on paper, show his new will to simplify, and his unabashed transport.[523] Mondrian had not yet discovered Paris, jazz, or the squats of Josephine Baker; the freedom to adorn his white walls with colored squares was still in the distant future; the confidence to speak a foreign language, to distance himself from everything familiar, was all ahead: but what was burgeoning was the phenomenal capacity for celebration, and, the ability to transmit his joy to others, which would make all of the eventual developments possible. This drawing took his enthusiasm to a new apogee—the exuberance which would underlie his best art from here on.

#

The confidence that soars in the large 1906 crayon, *Pine Woods near Oele*, reflects improvements in Mondrian's overall circumstances thanks not just to Albert Hulshoff Pol but also to a doctor named Johannes Fredericus Samuel Esser. Following a recent move from his native Leiden to

[523] A591 *Pine Woods near Oele*, c.1906, Gemeentemuseum.

Amsterdam, "Jan" Esser, five years Mondrian's junior, had begun to collect the artist's work. Esser was Mondrian's first really steady client—not simply a collector who on occasion bought something, but one of the handful of individuals whose enthusiasm and regular purchases would make Mondrian's existence as an artist feasible.

Eventually, Esser, a plastic surgeon, would pioneer innovative forms of reconstructive surgery on soldiers wounded in the First World War. He would coin the term "stent" after using a compound that had been invented in 1856 for dental impressions by the English dentist Charles Stent. Esser discovered that the mixture was ideal for making a form for facial reconstruction; the word "stent," which would eventually signify a range of devices used to expand constricted tubes of body tissue, came into use because he applied the dentist's name to the overall concept. The distinguished doctor would also be, in 1913, the Dutch national Chess Champion.[524] For the next couple of years, Mondrian would continue to benefit directly from Esser's largesse, and indirectly from his intellectual triumphs; now, living in Oele while returning infrequently to Amsterdam, he was delighted to know there was someone who would look at anything he produced with an eye possibly to purchasing it.[525] The prices for Mondrian's pictures were going up; when *On the Gein*, was in the St. Lucas 25th jubilee exhibition, it was listed at 800 guilders.[526] It was an exceptional high price, only this one and another painting of the pre-Cubist period were exhibited with a listed price as high as 800 guilders, which implies a quite large painting.[527]

Recharged with the energy that had been missing during the year in Amsterdam following his move from Brabant, content to be back in a rural region, Mondrian had new enthusiasm for everything he did. When his brother Willem got married in Pretoria, on March 7, he sent, as a wedding present, twelve plates on which he had painted Dutch landscapes.[528] It was a generous gift, the scenes enjoyable to contemplate. Willem's wife was to die a bit over two years later, following the birth of their two sons—one of whom was the nephew who would beseech Harry Holtzman for a gift following Mondrian's death—but, for now, everyone's future looked bright.

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[524] For an extensive biography of Esser, see: 'Een leven als roman: biografie van Johannes Fredericus Samuel Esser', in: Mayken Jonkman en Jacqueline de Raad, *De onstuitbare verzamelaar J.F.S. Esser. Mondriaan Breitner Sluijters e.a.*, Waanders, Zwolle 2005, p. 9-24.

[525] In the *Catalogue Raisonné* there are 73 works with provenance J.F.S Esser. Most of them have been acquired between 1906 and 1912. Esser was not really interested in the more abstract works, although he did visit Mondrian once in Paris. Jonkman, *Esser*, p. 55; 65.

[526] UA25 *Aan 't Gein*, 1906.

[527] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 476.

[528] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 125. Cf. Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 48.

The two drawings led to a series of large-scale oil sketches even more energetically awake than anything to date. Adding color to his woodland scenes, Mondrian now made sunlight his main subject. In some canvases it is reflected on a full moon; in others it is visible in a sliver of sky over a distant horizon, falling only on territory we imagine beyond our field of vision. In one painting of a mill, the entire sky is aglow in pure yellow paint with occasional dabs of blue, Mondrian visually exclaiming, "Magnificent!"[529] (Fig. 22)

Mondrian was now entirely consumed by the purposes that had developed during the year in Brabant. He engaged far more with paint and brushwork as independent forces than with representation. The illusion of a subject mattered less than the palpable processes of making art and the forthright and adventurous exploration of technique. In that painting of a mill, we are not sure if two bands of purple—one is above the brown horizon, while the other is a reflection in an expanse of water alongside the imposing machine to harness the wind—denote distant land or more sky. Mondrian makes us feel that it does not matter; what counts is the élan of the picture, and the act of painting.

Fig. 22. Mondrian, *Oostzijde Mill with Extended Blue, Yellow and Purple Sky*, 1907-1908

Anyone who spends a lot of time looking at landscapes knows this sort of situation when you cannot distinguish what is what with assuredness. Part of Mondrian's achievement is that he evokes that ambiguity. In so doing, he has rocketed past the tradition of art in which every nuance of a

[529] A411 *Oostzijdse Mill with Extended Blue, Yellow and Purple Sky*, c.1907-early 1908, Gemeentemuseum.

landscape is rendered as precisely as points on a map. Now he celebrates rather than conceals the mysteries of vision. Mondrian renders light, and optical experience, more important than geographical information.

This mill scene and his other paintings of light effects are similar in their intention to the art of the English nineteenth century painter J.M.W. Turner. Turner's work was vital to the liberation of certain modern painters who came well after him, but unless Mondrian had stopped in London and seen Turner's work en route to Hannah Crabb's in Cornwall—a detail of his life we may never succeed in sussing out—it is not because he had actually looked at Turner's work. The kinship is more likely the result of both painters having gazed at the sky and marveled at the sun as the source of life and the center of our solar system. As with Seurat, it was unlikely a matter of direct influence but of shared interests among individuals who lived in disparate places in different time periods but who responded, each on his own, to aspects of earthly life that are universal. More unusually, they belonged to the small group of human beings driven to create unprecedented visions and unafraid to throw caution to the winds and explore what to most people was impossible but to them was a splendid adventure.

III

By the time he was painting those triumphant scenes in Oele, Mondrian had become far better known to the Dutch public. He had had a small coterie of admirers and been selling his pictures for a decade, but now his paintings in group exhibitions attracted increased interest in the press, his collectors were buying his work even more eagerly. Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan now added "sr." to his name so that he would not be confused with his increasingly famous son.[530]

At the end of 1906, the artist Jan Sluijters, who had won one of the Prix de Rome that had eluded Mondrian and thus gone off to Paris, had his latest paintings shown at the Rijksakademie. Sluijters's work, which bore the distinct influence of Kees van Dongen and the other Fauves, caused an uproar.[531] Its Pointillist style and piercing colors raised hackles. Mondrian went to the show, and was intrigued by what he saw.[532]

Yet even if his own artistic departure was revolutionary in ways similar to Sluijters's, and fit in as part of a movement toward color choices more about feeling than subject matter, and form for its own sake rather than for

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[530] Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan added 'Senior' to his name in the books he edited and for which he made several plates. These books were published between 1902 and 1917. See Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 98-103.
[531] Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 43-45.
[532] Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 52.

the representation of nature, in fundamental ways Mondrian was painting differently from anybody else. His direction was akin to that of other modernists in Paris and Munich as well as closer to home, but his work had a unique character.

In 1907, Mondrian painted an oil on cardboard with brazen brushwork and vibrant colors that were completely original (Fig. 23).[533] Its redolent spiritual force was generated with a style of artistic creation that had no precedent. Its radical simplicity—and the artist's acrobatic capability, whereby only a few structural elements and a condensed, bold palette convey a peak moment of natural splendor—is astounding. This small painting is an example of Mondrian's sensitivity to the wonders of the universe, and his power to evoke them. It can make an alert viewer delirious.

Fig. 23. Mondrian, *The Red Cloud*, c. 1907

The bare cardboard visible in the background is the color of hay. Mondrian uses that neutral tone to full effect as the placid setting for the ecstatic events on top. He dashes off just the right earthy sun-drenched greens to make the grass grow, and deftly draws a horizon line behind them, exactly where it must be so that the viewer mentally moves into the picture space with a precise sense of the distance. Four dabs of black pigment evoke two cows; Mondrian's capacity to exercise that brevity of line to achieve such distinct articulation give the beasts and their visual recapitulation the immediacity and blunt reality of the horses and stags anonymous painters made in coal dust on the walls of the caves at Lascaux some hundres

[533] A569 *De Rode Wolk,* c.1907, 64 x 75 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

centuries previously. As for the luminous blue sky and the orange-red cloud: they define celestial energy and give color its miraculous power to gladden the human heart.

If one believes in God, *Red Cloud* represents a holy force, but it casts its magic equally on agnostics or atheists. Living in basic solitude while supported by Hulshoff Pol and a couple of other people, humble and hard-working, Mondrian declared his faith in the miracles of the universe. The sheer existence of clouds is fantastic; the light that impregnates them is even more astounding. This is beauty understandable to anyone who has ever seen the sky. At the same time, it took the art of painting to territory that had never existed before.

IV

The situation Albert Hulshoff Pol had organized for him on the farm in Saasveld enabled Mondrian to paint on a larger scale than before. In Brabant and Amsterdam, he had worked in small studios, and, needing adequate viewing distance to assess his compositions, as space against the wall to prop as many canvases as he was working on at a given time, he had kept the size of his pictures small. The room that Hulshoff Pol had transformed into a studio for him allowed him to work bigger. *Fen near Saasveld* is 102 x 180 cm; a number of other canvases averaged 75 x 120 cm.[534] The larger dimensions made Mondrian all the more courageous in his use of color.

Fig. 24. Mondrian, *Riverscape with Row of Trees at Left, Sky with Pink and Yellow-Green Bands: Farmstead on the Gein screened by Tall Trees,* c. late 1907-1908

[534] A554 *Fen near Saasveld, Large Version*, c.1907, 102 x 180,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

The sky in *Riverscape with Row of Trees* (Fig. 24) consists of irregular bands of lime green tinged in a luminous deep yellow juxtaposed with striated expanses of billowing dusty pink.[535] A soft mauve appears at intervals in the pink. The green-yellow of the sky and the pink-purple of what must be rows of clouds establishes the time of day as sunset. The same colors, all brought down a key, appear as reflections in a vast pond. The generous height and width of the canvas enabled Mondrian to carry off these bold effects with an ease that would not have been possible on a smaller scale. The subject matter was familiar—while this scene could be based on any number of places, its basis was probably the territory around the Gein River, his stumping ground previous to the move—but its interpretation was radical.

Hulshoff Pol, who was painting nearby, served as Mondrian's amanuensis. He organized the transport of Mondrian's choices for important exhibitions back in Amsterdam. As soon as Mondrian was satisfied with *Summer Night*, it went off to Arti et Amicitiae exhibition held in April and May of 1907.[536] This pastoral scene features a full moon which Mondrian made with a brilliant circle of light yellow that has two wider circular bands surrounding it. The first band is also bright yellow, but slightly toned down; the second is a subtler deep mauve. The moonlight is reflected in what can be read as either a marsh or a shallow river that is a radiant silver, while the sky is a sea-mist green. The foreground, a mix of lush fertile green and the brown of rich soil, balances the palette with its weight.

It was in all likelihood at this exhibition that Conrad Kickert, a rich young collector-painter-critic who would soon become a significant figure in Mondrian's life, discovered the artist for the first time. Kickert's first impressions were not immediately positive. He wrote about the painting in *De Telegraaf* on April 13, declaring this 'dream of a "Summer Night" […] scandalously hung.'[537] The reason Kickert objected to the installation was because he felt that such a bold and commanding work needed far more space around it than the curators had allotted it. Kickert pointed out the unusual nature of its floating colors: 'the dark purple halo around the golden moon is independent in tone and has no delineation, no space'.[538]

When *Summer Night* was shown eight years later, in Rotterdam—in an exhibition held in 1915 when, because of the war, such shows were less frequent and especially significant because no art could be brought in from

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[535] A497 *Riverscape with Row of Trees at Left, Sky with Pink and Yellow-Green Bands: Farmstead on the Gein Screened by Tall Trees*, c.late 1907-1908, 75 x 120 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

[536] A523 *Zomernacht*, 1907, 71 x 110,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

[537] Kickert, 'Arti et Amicitiae', in: *De Telegraaf*, April 13 1907, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 360.

[538] Kickert, 'Arti et Amicitiae', in: *De Telegraaf*, April 13 1907, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 360.

other countries—the critic for *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer* would call it one of three 'stewed brown landscape impressions […] somewhat weak and fugitive.'[539] This was the norm of mainstream criticism about Mondrian's work throughout his years in the Netherlands. Fortunately he never expected widespread approval.

Summer Night is almost unquestionably the painting Mondrian had in mind in his autobiographical *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue*, which he would write in 1919. One of the characters, Z ('an abstract-real painter'), in conversation with X, (a naturalistic painter), and Y, (an art-lover), declares: 'In this landscape the horizontal […] is really only depicted by the *definition* of the horizontal line of the skyline. […] Height is depicted *as a plane*. The sky is shown as an indefinite plane, but the moon as *a point*, hence *exact*. The plane is defined *from this point to the horizon*: *defined* by a *vertical line*. […] So if we draw it, the opposite of the horizon is *defined*. We thus see that the relationship of directions, though not exact, does manifest itself plastically in nature. And the balanced relation of directions—the rectangular confrontation of lines and planes—constitutes the plastic of *calm*.'[540]

The italics are Mondrian's own. 'The plastic of calm' was his greatest goal. By putting those words in the mouth of the savvy connoisseur who defended *Summer Night* against the scourge of the old-fashioned naturalistic artist who understood nothing of this untraditional, even anti-traditional artistic style, Mondrian was both making the case for what he passionately believed in, and resolutely stating his purpose so that the larger audience, the naysayers about his art who were in the majority, might understand at least that everything he did, he did on purpose.

#

The year that he painted *The Red Cloud* and *Summer Night*, Mondrian was featured in the book *Onze Moderne Meesters* by F. M. Lurasco.[541] Lurasco included the contemporary painters and sculptors in the Netherlands whom he considered the most influential in the country and internationally, and also had entries for eight artists who were no longer alive but whose impact was still being felt. He asked each of the living artists to provide a portrait and brief biography of himself. Besides Mondrian, his Uncle Frits, as well as August Allebé, Jozef Israëls, Jacob Maris, Simon Maris, Willem Maris, Jan

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[539] Havelaar, *De Nieuwe Amsterdammer*, February 27 1915, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 361.

[540] Piet Mondrian, *Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the* City, 1919-1920, as quoted from Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 85.. Mondrian's second essay in conversational form was begun in the Netherlands at the outset of 1919 and completed in Paris after his return there in July of that year. It appeared in *De Stijl* in twelve installments, from June 1919 through July 1920.

[541] F.M. Lurasco, *Onze Moderne Meesters*, C.L.G. Veldt, Amsterdam 1907, [n.p.].

Sluijters, C. Spoor, and Jan Toorop were included. Only three years after putting himself in exile first in Brabant, and now again in Saasveld, Mondrian had risen to the stature of one of the leading artists of his era. Modern art in Amsterdam was flourishing, and he was part of its upper stratum. Work by Cézanne and Van Gogh was shown at the Rijksmuseum, conferring on it a new acceptability, although the opinions of the public were still divided.[542]

Again, he returned to the hotbed. In 1908, Mondrian moved back to Amsterdam and took an agreeable space for working and living in a building designed just for artists, at Sarphatipark 42. He would stay there for four years.[543] He remained an outsider—living by himself, which, for a man over thirty-five, conferred on him other people's assumption of lifelong bachelorhood—yet he was in a sympathetic milieu where he was surrounded by fellow artists also experimenting with methods of painting that defied tradition.

Among them, he was in the upper echelon. His originality and prodigious skill had elevated him to the position of one of the most respected modern painters in the Netherlands. Although he would never make a lot of money through his art, he enjoyed an esteem, and from some circles a reverence, that gave him a reason to be sufficiently secure and confident to take his painting to new heights.

V

Yet once he was back in Amsterdam, something was deeply wrong inside him. Mondrian assumed a dramatically different appearance, a mix of an Indian swami and Rasputin. He let his beard grow long and full, and stopped cutting his hair. He kept it parted in the middle, as before, but now it fell as long as it would grow and was totally scraggly. Whenever the camera was on him, he had a wild look in his eyes (Fig. 25).

Having long been fascinated by Theosophy, Mondrian was now firmly in its grips.[544] He was trying to anchor himself emotionally by relegating all that was physical and material—and, presumably, sexual—to a position of little or no importance. His new style of self-presentation was part of a

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[542] Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 33-34. Herbert Henkels, 'Cézanne en Van Gogh in het Rijksmuseum voor moderne Kunst in Amsterdam: de collectie van Cornelis Hoogendijk (1866-1911)', in: *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum* 41(1993), p. 155-287.

[543] Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers,* p. 52.

[544] Cf. Marty Bax, *Het prost. Theosofie en Kunst in Nederland. Van Lauweriks tot Mondriaan*, SUN, Amsterdam 2006, p. 261. More recently a new book about Mondrian and Theosophy was published, see Jacqueline van Paaschen, *Mondriaan en Steiner. Wegen naar Nieuwe Beelding*, Komma, Den Haag 2017.

delineate effort to become a mystic in the eyes of others. Of course you may find this to be the peak of mental health, and may consider the own obvious value judgment to be completely astray, but this sort of self-conscious rebellion against his own previous (and subsequent) standards of physical appearance—neat, untheatrical, straightforward, and elegant—strikes me as a sign of destabilization, of floundering, and Mondrian chosing to look like a Kahlil Gibran character has an unauthenticity that was totally out of character for the way he was for most of his life.

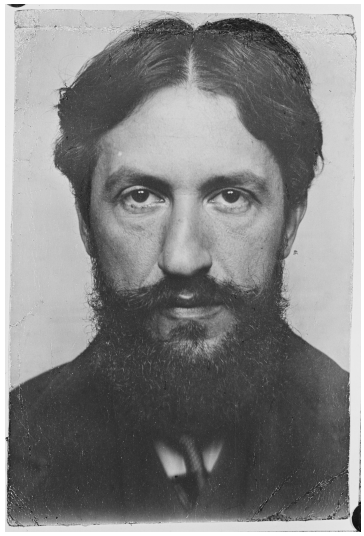

Fig. 25. Portrait photo of Mondrian, with full beard and hair parted in the middle, c. 1908
(photographer unknown; RKD – Netherlands Institute for Art History)

His theosophic self-outfitting began that March when Rudolph Steiner, Secretary of the German Branch of the Theosophical Society, gave lectures in Amsterdam. Steiner's views grabbed Mondrian totally; the ideas of this Austrian educator were life-changing for him. Among the few books Mondrian would save lifelong was a published summation of those talks.[545] Steiner's thinking, even more than the writing of Madame Blavatsky and her followers, emphasized art, which was one of the reasons they had such an impact on him. It would last a long time; over a decade later, when he was living in Paris, Mondrian would write Steiner himself, and would expand

[545] *Verslag van de voordrachten gehouden door Dr. Rudolph Steiner, voor de Nederl. Afd. Theos. Ver. 4-11 maart 1908*. Mondrian's copy is in the Piet Mondrian Papers (GEN MSS 1102), Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven.

Steiner's theories to Van Doesburg as fundamental to their own beliefs in the transformative power of art.[546]

While on the lecture circuit, Steiner had met Marie von Sivers, who owned the Theosophical headquarters in Berlin. She had translated, into German, Edouard Schuré's book, *The Great Initiators*, which had had such importance for Mondrian when he read it the previous year. Steiner would explain, in an autobiography he wrote in 1928, 'Into the programme of the congress was introduced an artistic representation. Marie von Sievers long before translated Schuré's reconstruction of the Eleusinian drama […] [provided] an artistic element directed towards the purpose of not leaving the spiritual life henceforth void of art within the Society.'[547] Mondrian was moved by Steiner's call to give society at large a form of art that would realize Theosophy's goal of an enriched spiritual life. He had already been thinking similarly, but had never before heard or read such succinct statements on the possible benefit of art as a means of human enlightenment.

'He who understands life can become a truly practical man.'[548] Mondrian welcomed this summons from Steiner to increase his understanding of the life's priorities and to become effective with that knowledge. Steiner's notion that 'the human soul finds truth by other ways than discussion'[549] translated to a belief that brushes and paint and canvas, rather than verbal language, would lead him to that higher truth, and consequently to the betterment of humankind.

Until Steiner gave his lectures in Amsterdam, Mondrian, while interested in Theosophy and friendly with members of the Theosophical Society, had remained on the edges of the movement. In Brabant, he had explored its tenets extensively with Van den Briel and had read the Bible in depth, but he had studied and theorized without commitment.[550] Steiner's views making artistic creation a vehicle of religious practice transformed him. Theosophy itself took on new value, and the potential role of painting to have an impact on all of human civilization seemed even greater than it had to date. He was emboldened as never before to pursue the making of art as a vehicle to give meaning to his own life and better the existence of everyone on earth.

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Theosophy would play a role in Mondrian's thinking for the rest of his life, but there was only a brief period when it was his all and everything. In those

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[546] Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction*, p. 182-183.
[547] Rudolf Steiner *The Story of My Life*, Anthroposophical Publishing Co., London 1928, p. 338.
[548] Rudolf Steiner, *Theosophy. An Introduction to the Supersensible Knowledge of the World and the Destination of Man*, K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, London 1910, p. xi-xii.
[549] Steiner, *Theosophy*, p. xix.
[550] Bax, *Web der Schepping*, p. 258-59.

months when he had all the devotion of the most committed convert, Mondrian made a ravishing painting which he titled *Evening: Haystacks in a Field* (Fig. 26).[551] For the first time, he gave supremacy to the three primary colors he would make central in his later work.[552] A single stripe of red creates a sunset in a patch of blue against the white cloudy sky that constitutes almost the entire painting, while a band of vibrant yellow on top of an even more intense yellow line radiates above the horizon line in the lower part of the canvas. (The haystacks themselves are in the dark foreground, incidental to their paradisiacal setting: an unwelcome interruption to a magnificent field where the furrows glow deep orange.)

The penetrating hues and simplicity of forms in *Haystacks*, set against the gray whiteness of the entire universe, depict the cosmic force at the root of Theosophical belief. Mondrian was more determined than ever to make the larger dimensions of existence the underlying theme of his art. Now that he was again living among farmers, he was reminded of the role of the sun as the determinant of natural growth, the source of heat and cause of rainfall essential to the life cycle, the meaninglessness of petty details in comparison to the universality and timelessness of the solar system and beyond. When he painted the field, and sky and stacks of hay bathed in sunlight, his reverence shone. It would do so equally in his pure abstractions with their colors clearly machined and their forms strictly rectilinear; the melody would change, but the worship remain.

Fig. 26. Mondrian, *Avond (Evening); Haystacks in a field,* 1908

Almost as soon as it came off the easel, *Evening: Haystacks in a Field* was another of Mondrian's paintings that became a hot topic in Amsterdam. It was again included in the St. Lucas Society's spring exhibition. A

[551] A561 *Avond (Evening); Haystacks in a Field*, 1908, 82 x 193 cm, private collection.
[552] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127.

reproduction of it—in the newspaper *Het Leven* on May 22, 1908—was used to bolster the argument by the critic N.H. Wolf that, in spite of what negative voices were saying, the painting was based on an actual occurrence in nature. This was still the reigning criterion in determining the merit of an art work. 'There has been namely no agreement whether or not the painter could have seen such a thing in a natural setting: a fierce stripe of red […] in the middle of a blue sky after the sun has set […] It occurs to me that it indeed could have been so. […] Mondriaan must—at least can— have seen it as he painted it for us. His "Evening" appears to me derived from reality.'[553]

Mondrian was being judged by standards that had nothing to do with his purposes. What mattered to him more than a fealty to the real world as most people perceive it was 'the knowledge of the supersensible' and a 'higher truth'—the terms are Rudolf Steiner's.[554] A precise natural event was of no meaning to him; his goal was to create and invent, not reproduce what already existed. But at least his offbeat approach still had its defenders. The full-out critical fusillade was yet to come.

VI

Mondrian's interest in Theosophy was not just spiritual. In 1908, he met, in a concert audience, the violinist Aletta Jacoba de Iongh. Even though they never became lovers, they developed what for Mondrian was, in spite of his flirtation with Nell Harrenstein, a closer relationship than he had had with any woman to date. Their idea of "a date" was to go to a lecture at the Theosophical Society together. Mondrian was expanding his social circle, and most of his new acquaintances were members or, if they had not officially joined, partisans of the thinking of Helena Blavatsky.

That September, Mondrian went to Domburg, a beach resort in Zeeland that was the preferred haunt of Theosophists, most of them painters or musicians or writers.[555] The leading figure in the local artists' colony was Jan Toorop and Mondrian immediately became part of Toorop's circle, fully on board with their spiritual practice as well as their wish to paint in a way true to its tenets. In Domburg, he acquired a portrait photograph of the elderly Madame Blavatsky and hung it in his. Mondrian would never care as much about being part of a group as guarding his individuality and independence, but for the first time he was surrounded by roughly like-minded people. This would continue to be true on subsequent summers in Domburg and then in the village of Laren. These two Dutch artists' colonies where

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[553] N.H. Wolf, *Het Leven*, May 22 1908, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 381.
[554] Steiner, *Theosophy*, p. XVI.
[555] *Domburgsch Badnieuws* reports the arrival at the Strand Hotel of Mondrian during the period September 3-10, Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127.

philosophical investigation went hand in hand with new approaches to painting would be a home to him of a sort he had never had before, and would never have again after he left Laren in 1919. Still, he hung that photo of Helena Blavatsky in his Paris studio and took it with him to London and New York; it was among the very few possessions Mondrian kept with him on each of his moves, to three studios in Paris and one in London and two in New York.[556] For a man who had no family memorabilia and only a handful of objects he called his own, it was an extraordinary attachment—and a fascinating contradiction of his faith in abstraction and philosophical ideas alongside a complete rejection of hero worship. The woman who codified Theosophy was the sole exception.

#

Domburg was not just what we might picture as a New Age yoga retreat with the Theosophists assuming meditation poses on the beach and noting their chakras; it was also the Dutch Deauville. Or, if you prefer, Newport. An old fishing village, at the end of the nineteenth century it became a luxurious beach resort for fashionable clientele. It offered tennis, hiking, and croquet to the German and Dutch aristocrats who came not so much for ocean swimming—the water was cold and the currents strong— as for salt water cures and other amenities that could be enjoyed at the large wooden hotels with wide verandas.[557]

This agreeable holiday spot is at the southwesternmost point of the Netherlands, just north of the Belgian border, in the province of Zeeland, which means "Land of the sea." When Mondrian knew it, Zeeland was comprised of small islands, many of them primarily farmland. Their situation was fragile, with storms often causing erosion and flooding. In 1953, the flooding would be so catastrophic that sea walls were constructed and the geographic situation of the region permanently altered, but in the time period when Mondrian was there it was exceptionally scenic, in part because it was like freckles of solid ground only a stone's throw from one another in the sea. The unusual feature of its vulnerability added to its allure, the way that fragility and the sense of constant changes is what adds to the very particular enchantment of Venice for those of us attracted to the perpetual shifts intrinsic to all of existence. Zeeland, more than most beach resorts, even those subject to hurricanes, was so affected by climate and tides and weather that those of its visitors who chose not to close their eyes were made keenly aware of the occasional instability of what seems rock-solid, and of how fleeting life can be.

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[556] The photograph is now in the Archive of Piet Mondrian, RKD #0740, inv.nr. 073.

[557] For the artistic milieu around that time in Domburg, see: Francisca van Vloten, 'Dromen van Weleer. Kunstenaars in Domburg 1898-1928', in: Ineke Spaander (red.), *Reünie op 't Duin. Mondriaan en tijdgenoten in Zeeland*, Waanders, Zwolle 1994, p. 11-71.

Domburg is one of four villages on Walcheren, the island that is the furthest to the west of these small bodies of land in the North Sea. The villages were at the time protected only by dunes which were at risk for being washed inland when the ocean became tumultuous. It was a hard way of life for the farmers who lived there, but in 1906, only two years before Mondrian made his first visit, a tram line had been constructed between these coastal villages and Middelburg, the capital city of Zeeland, which improved the local economy by making it easier and less expensive to ship farm products and ferry tourists.

Mondrian first visited Domburg in 1908, but only briefly. Toorop had been frequenting the spot with his family since 1903, and other painters Mondrian knew—among them Jacoba van Heemskerck van Beest—were there that summer.[558] People's coming and goings were reported in the *Domburgsch Badnieuws*—one of those resort newspapers that gave visitors the satisfaction of having their names in print when they arrived on holiday, whether at a private villa or at one of the large hotels along the dunes. On September 12 that year, the *Domburgsch Badnieuws* provided the information that 'P. Mondriaan and family (two people)' had been at the Strand Hotel between September 3 and 10.[559]

The Strand Hotel was a fine establishment with parapets and towers. The term 'and family' means, presumably, that someone was registered with Mondrian as if she were his wife. Robert Welsh simply calls her a 'mystery woman.'[560] Mondrian would meet Eva de Beneditty and Margaretha Heijbroek, two important women in his life, only in the following year, and while his companion in the hotel might have been Aletta de Iongh—among other things, she had sufficient family money to pay for that sort of hotel—Mondrian's companion may, posits Welsh, have been a woman whose name will never be known.

Michel Seuphor provides completely different information about that first trip Mondrian took to Domburg. He reports that Mondrian went there with Cornelis Rudolf Hendrick Spoor, a fellow painter who was an active Theosophist who had become a member of the Theosophical Society in 1905 and, in 1909, would co-sign Mondrian's application to that elite organization.[561] Spoor, five years older than Mondrian, had become a close friend in spite of the complete dissimilarity between his work and Mondrian's. Spoor's somber portraits look as if they could have been painted a century earlier for the sitting rooms of stately men's clubs, and his traditional still-lifes for the dining rooms of those same establishments. He

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[558] *Van Vloten, Dromen van Weleer*, p. 21.
[559] *Domburgsch Badnieuws*, September 12 1908, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127.
[560] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127.
[561] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 76.

had, even more than Mondrian, an obsession with children as the embodiment of the innocence idealized in Theosophy.

According to Seuphor, the two men rented two rooms in a farmhouse not far from the village, and were often visited there by Jan Toorop.[562] Mondrian must have told Seuphor that these were the circumstances of his travel. Either he misremembered, or was covering something up; the contemporaneous newspaper account stating that he and one other person, thought to be a family member, has to be accurate. Whether it was a woman registered as his wife or another man, perhaps Spoor, presented as his brother—and therefore as "family"—is unknown.[563] Regardless, they stayed in a fancy hotel.

Mondrian appears not to have done any work in Domburg that year. He was only there for a week, and, if he did any work, it has disappeared, for there are no drawings or paintings extant. I like to think of him, enjoying himself, whoever his companion was, being with a new circle of friends, marveling at the scenery, and meditating on the principles of Theosophy—all entirely possible, if not provable. Still, that first short visit there had a vast impact on him—as would all of his subsequent trips to the seaside resort.

Later in his life, there would be very few details of his pre-Paris life that Mondrian considered noteworthy; the transformation that occurred in Domburg was one of the only events he considered significant. 'The first thing to change in my painting was the color,' he would recall in 1941 in his only explicitly autobiographical essay.[564] 'I forsook natural color for pure color. I had come to feel that the colors of nature cannot be reproduced on canvas. Instinctively, I felt that painting had to find a new way to express the beauty of nature.'[565]

That shift to a palette based on oil paint more than nature, and to brush strokes that directly reflect the act of painting more than they simulate knowable surfaces, invigorates *Woods near Oele*—a tour de force he completed in the fall of 1908, after this first trip to Domburg (Fig. 27).[566] His breakthrough approach to hue and unprecedented technique were, in a certain way, related to the work of the Fauves in Paris and the Blaue Reiter

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[562] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 76.

[563] Hans Janssen thinks that most likely it was Agathe Zethraeus. Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 355 and p. 634 note 46.

[564] Piet Mondrian, *Toward the True Vision of Reality*, 1941, as quoted from: Holtzman, *Collected Writings,* p. 338. Mondrian's only explicitly autobiographical essay was written in spring 1941 and published as a pamphlet by the Valentine Gallery, New York, in connection with his first exhibition in the United States (January-February 1942).

[565] Mondrian, *Toward the True Vision of Reality*, 1941, as quoted in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings,* p. 338.

[566] A593 *Bosch (Woods); Woods near Oele*, 1908, 128 x 158 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

painters in Munich—those artistic revolutionaries who had first shattered tradition and shocked the public, and who were still going strong with their paintings of women with pink and yellow skin and landscapes with lime green skies—but the main reason Mondrian had changed course was that imperative of conveying 'the beauty of nature.' Those words he used when writing about his own development did not refer to what was merely picturesque; they were an allusion to the workings of the universe: the passion to which Mondrian always returned to. He would eventually rid his art of knowable subject matter, but the reverence for air and light and the wonders of existence were constant.

Fig. 27. Mondrian, *Bosch; Woods near Oele*, 1908

Inner necessity, more than a response to what was happening in the art of others, compelled him. Movements like Fauvism and Pointillism had an impact, but what touched his soul more were the dunes and sea he observed in Domburg. Like his exposure to raw nature in the Brabant and Oele, the time facing the sea and coastline—both for the first time—were the main catalyst for change.

Mondrian, in a straightforward way, summed up his own progress, and the factors that governed it: 'After several years, my work began to deviate more and more from the natural aspects of reality […] I knew little of the modern art movement […] I admired it, but I had to seek my true way

alone.'[567] That one week in Zeeland and his first taste of the seaside, led him to contemplate in a new way what it is that is ever-changing but lasts forever, and to see the mutability of the real. More than ever, he focused on the grand scheme, and recognized that if he was going to express truth as he saw it, even as he respected the new vocabulary and methods of some of the latest art, he had to find, completely on his own, the best means to express it.

Presumably he completed *Woods near Oele* in his Amsterdam studio, which is where he settled the autumn after the idyll in Domburg. We cannot be precise about when in the course of the year he was in the studio provided for him by Hulshoff Pol in the countryside and when he was back in the city—Van den Briel, who was in his last year at the agricultural school in Wageningen in 1908, reported that he visited Mondrian in Oele in the course of that year, but does not specify when—but, even if Mondrian finished the work in Amsterdam, the painting was a paean to the purely natural world devoid of human presence.[568]

It was the quality of undisturbed nature that intoxicated him on the dunes, even if here it was in the woods. The forest thrilled Mondrian the way sand and sea did. He has, as usual, painted trees from the vantage point of being smack up against them. It is a dramatic encounter with nature in all its grandeur. The trees don't merely grow; most of them shoot upwards and reach toward the sun.

There are, however, glaring exceptions to all this good health. The few trees that do not soar from the ground are not merely inert; they are tragic. Some are uprooted. One unfortunate specimen is bent and slumped over, appearing to be in a macabre dance, responding to another disabled tree with which it does a slow tango. These dead trees are so forlorn and destitute as his most wilted chrysanthemums.

The foreground of *Woods near Oele* consists, above all, of pure paint. In society, Mondrian was reserved, even timid; with a paint brush, he allowed himself to be at the edge of total abandon. Using the tools of his trade, the man who was socially inhibited and reticent, exercised, as nowhere else, an unbridled force. Unshackled, his energy and courage were gargantuan.

Color gave him his full voice. In this remarkable canvas, the horizontal gashes of red have the life of blood, the celestial blue radiates an other-worldly light, and the rusty oranges crash like a tidal wave. And these vibrant hues are just the opening salvo; following their thunderbolt overture, the viewer is pulled toward a pool of yellow dashes which represent sunlight itself.

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[567] Mondrian, *Toward the True Vision of Reality*, 1941, as quoted in: Holtzman, *Collected Writings,* p. 338.
[568] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127; p. 143, note 49.

Mondrian had become his own master. The developments of the previous four years had converged to make him confident and fearless. Albert van den Briel had cared for him; Hannes Dortman had introduced him to the idea of redemption; Albert Hulshoff Pol had become a second Van den Briel. Theosophy, via Rudolph Steiner, had taken the paint and guilt out of the spiritualism of his childhood, and infused it with joy that could be expressed by the act of painting. And Mondrian had patiently, diligently mastered the craft, with sufficient technical skill to be able to paint on his own terms. Now that he was making his own rules, he willingly let the drips show. In *Woods near Oele,* by allowing the unprimed canvas to appear in the background hither and yon, he gives the colors their maximum impact. His independence and originality become even more evident as you advance beyond the foreground. You get into the woods, and you have a horizon line which, to the modern eye, resembles, as much as anything, a row of automobile headlights or a barrage of military tanks coming along at night.

The traditional art historical analysis of this seminal painting links it to Pointillism and the Fauves—if one insists on citing influences, Van Gogh would be equally relevant—but what matters more than such references to the art of others are the elements that make *Woods near Oele* unique.[569] If on some level Mondrian was influenced by what Jan Toorop was doing at the time, or by what he may have seen at the Stedelijk, so be it; he has made an image that essentially compares to nothing else.

What he has achieved in *Woods near Oele* is a celebration of the sun as the source of life. The painting greets you with a "wow". The hues and the brushwork invigorate you. For all the excitement, however, the picture provides, above all, a feeling of grace, equilibrium, and calm. As far back as you can see, on the left, there are some diagonal dashes that move downward to the right; these broad strokes of mauve and blue, essentially the same width, run into a brilliant yellow—a small region of pure sunlight the shape of an archipelago—that emerges from behind the mop-like foliage of a couple of happy, flourishing trees. The effect of looking at it is salubrious. This region of lighter colors is a poignantly beautiful vignette, a visual equivalent of heaven that is a spiritual heaven to look at. The quietest moment in this whole vibrant, bold assemblage of strokes, this little area of delicate hues and deliberately measured dashes is the essence of Mondrian's art, the fulfillment of the same goal that determined his later abstract compositions: an expression of utmost balance, tranquility, and joy.

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Mondrian would return to Domburg on subsequent summers, and to the same spiritual territory for the rest of his life. A new sense of the universe,

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[569] Cf. Loosjes-Terpstra*, Moderne kunst*, p. 53; C. Blok (ed.), *Mondriaan in de collectie van het Haags Gemeentemuseum: catalogus 1968*, Haags Gemeentemuseum, Den Haag 1968, p. 22-31; Hans L.C. Jaffé, *Piet Mondrian*, Abrams, New York 1985, p. 60.

and an unprecedented vision of light and color, were born in him quite simply by being at the miraculous border of sea and land.

That he experienced new camaderie there certainly helped. In Domburg he became more a part of an artists' community than he had ever been. A few years earlier, he had been one of the group to bicycle to Amsterdam's outskirts to paint and hang out at the artists' café on the Gein together, but he had always lived apart from any group—even if he was not always as isolated as when he retreated to Brabant and Oele.

At the end of the year, Mondrian, Cornelis Spoor, and Jan Sluijters wrote a letter to the Mayor of Amsterdam requesting a three-person exhibition. The initiative was thought to be Mondrian's, and he and Sluijters and Spoor knew that C.W.H. Baard, the Stedelijk's curator, would be sympathetic, but, still, the letter to the mayor is a masterpiece of chutzpah: '[...] respectfully request to have the necessary locality in the Stedelijk Museum to organize an exhibition of their works of art. The reason for this request is the fact that undersigned each have their own very personal endeavor in their art, which is not well to fruition at large scale exhibitions – because of the many works of different art and because of the very few number of artworks which can be sent in. [...]'[570] The answer was yes, but there was little time to spare. The large show was immediately scheduled to open at the start of the following year.

Suddenly there was a lot of organizing to do. The Stedelijk show would give Mondrian the chance to present a comprehensive overview of his work to the Dutch public. At a moment when, in Paris and Munich, the Fauves and Cubists and Blue Riders artists were all turning the art of painting into a gripping expression of revolutionary attitudes, Amsterdam, too, had become a hotbed of modernism. Here, too, a few brave individuals were breaking the boundaries of how to make art. Mondrian was at the forefront. Sluijters not far behind if not as gifted, and Spoor friendly to them both and a subtle luminist if not as much of an adventurer. For all three, the chance to show as much work as they wanted in this Amsterdam museum was an extraordinary opportunity. They had landed themselves a very big fish.

VII

The invitation to the opening of the show of Spoor, Mondrian, and Sluijters at the Stedelijk declared that it would be "a correct overview of our development and the personal nature of our work."[571] The three artists put it together at breakneck pace and at their own cost. They could not afford a catalogue, but Mondrian in particular wanted to show the world the full

[570] Print of letter in: Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 38; original at Stadsarchief Amsterdam.
[571] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 134, note 52.

range of his artistic exploration to date, and he asked everyone possible to lend the paintings he had once been so happy to sell them so that he could keep pushing his art to new places. In addition, he was painting and sketching new pictures for the exhibition up to the very last moment. There was no point even in hazarding a checklist, since printing took time, and by the time the exhibition opened, he would surely have revised, eliminated, or added pieces on the list. He ended up with approximately two hundred and fifty works on view. Spoor had almost as many, and if Sluijters had slightly fewer, they blanketed every available wall at the Stedelijk. This hodgepodge was shown without labels and absent any particular sense of sequence. Mondrian had thrown a lot of his canvases into rough white wooden frames at the last moment (one of the many points for which he would be criticized), and included a number of paintings that he was still working on and others he had never finished. This meant that when the exhibition opened its doors on January 6, 1909, the public could see, for better or worse, a compendium of his work from the time when he left the Rijksakademie, ranging in style from mild-mannered to, in the eyes of many viewers, outrageous. The selection was unedited; what was apparent above all else, was that even if Mondrian was completely inconsistent in style, he was ever the same in his determination to paint fluidly and to present a vision of earthly bounty; if there was one element that every work—from the early portraits to the views of somber industrial buildings to the colorful sunsets in the countryside—had in common, it was the preponderance of the two intangible miracles of light and air.

VIII

Two days following the Stedelijk opening, Mondrian's mother died in Arnhem. She was seventy years old, a decent age for the time.

Nothing is known about whether Johanna Christina Mondriaan died suddenly and unexpectedly, or whether she had suffered from a long illness. What has been and continues to be reported, however, is Mondrian's response. It is stated consistently in the Mondrian literature that the artist considered himself too busy with his exhibition in Amsterdam to bother to attend his own mother's funeral.[572]

Robert Welsh, the scholars' scholar in Mondrian studies, writes 'January 8: death of the artist's mother, whose funeral Piet does not attend due to his involvement with the just opened exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum.'[573] Other Mondrian sources have repeated the information since then. The catalogue of the 2011 Mondrian exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in Paris,

[572] In his 2016 biography, Hans Janssen does have Mondrian present at his mothers funeral. Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 373.
[573] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 128.

a definitive recent source with a substantial chronology, says Mondrian was absent at the funeral because he was 'retenu par l'ouverture de l'exposition du Stedelijk Museum.'[574] No one makes any editorial comment about the artist's failure to get there; they don't have to. It is the quintessential indecency.

For someone not to attend his mother's funeral—unless there are extraordinary circumstances such as his being deployed as a soldier thousands miles from home, during wartime (in peace, accommodations are usually made for such an event)—is pathological. The reason of his being too busy with his own work—especially since the Stedelijk show was already installed, all of the preparatory work done—makes it even more troublesome than if there was a personal rift between mother and son. In *L'Étranger*, when Meursault contemplates missing his mother's funeral for no particular reason, it is because Camus has chosen that possibility as the ultimate act of disconnectedness.

Johanna Mondriaan was buried at cemetery Moscowa in Arnhem, where she was living at the time, so it would have been an easy and short journey from Amsterdam for her oldest son.[575]

Eventually, however, I noticed that neither Welsh nor any of the other writers provide a source for this bombshell that Mondrian considered himself too busy to attend his own mother's funeral. But I assumed that these serious scholars had a basis for the claim. That is why I was astounded to find a letter which Carel Mondriaan wrote a year following Mondrian's death, which completely contradicts the rumor.[576]

Carel, living in Breda, was reconstructing his brother's life for Sal Slijper. Slijper was attempting to assemble biographical information while it was still possible to do so. On November 15, 1945, piecing together the chronological details and trying to establish certain facts, Carel reports that in 1903 he, having been appointed to the Rijksbank, moved to Amsterdam, where Piet, as well as their brother Willem, who had recently returned from Transvaal, were also living. Trying to determine the date of Piet's move to Paris, Carel goes on to say 'So I think the first time he went to Paris was in 1910 or 1911. I remember him being present at Mother's funeral in 1909.'[577]

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[574] Brigitte Léal*, Mondrian*, Centre Pompidou, Paris 2010, p. 275.

[575] Later P.C. Mondriaan senior was also buried there. Scholtz, 'Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan senior', in: C.A.M. Gietman [ed.], *Biografisch Woordenboek Gelderland* (2002)3, (http://www.biografischwoordenboekgelderland.nl/bio/3_Pieter_Cornelis_Mondriaan_senior).

[576] Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 15 1945, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 130.

[577] 'Ik denk dus dat hij 1910 of 11 de eerste maal naar Parijs ging. Ik herinner mij dat hij bij Moeders overlijden in 1909 bij haar uitvaart tegenwoordig was.' Letter Carel Mondriaan to Sal Slijper, November 15 1945.

Mondrian was dedicated above all to his art, but he was not the heartless careerist historians have decided to make him. Why he has been skewered for a breach of decency of which he was not guilty is impossible to know. But to date there is no evidence whatsoever, no proof any scholar can find, that Mondrian was not there respectfully honoring the woman who had given birth to him and provided what had always been a decent home, if not a particularly amusing one.

IX

The critic who jumped on the 'crude, scarcely planed, white wooden frame' which, he wrote disparagingly, suited Mondrian's 'hallucinatory landscapes,' was kind compared to other commentators on the Stedelijk exhibition.[578] More than any other painting, *Woods near Oele*—which Mondrian had painted during the previous year—led to the artist's vilification in the press. He was pronounced a madman.

A week after the show opened, the critic for the *Algemeen Handelsblad*—"Giovanni", a pseudonym employed by Jan Kalff—wrote 'I comprehend nothing about […] a colorful landscape with trees' in reference to it.[579] Conrad Kickert, who was rapidly becoming a stalwart of the Mondrian camp, was more sympathetic, writing, also in reference to *Woods near Oele*, 'I admire the high vault in a blue sketch of the woods,'[580] but most people were shocked by the large canvas inspired during the happy period when Mondrian worked in the makeshift studio organized by Albert Pol. In February, 'psychiatrist, utopian and moralist' Frederik van Eeden, wrote in an article 'Health and Decadence in Art' that Mondrian's fall is tragic and terrifying.[581] 'As his original gifts were of the very highest, so his fall is the hardest.'[582] *Woods near Oele* was the exemplar of the way the artist had plummeted.

Van Eeden commends the artist's 'early period' for its 'really magnificent subjects,' color that is 'marvelously beautiful,' and a 'grand and noble' vision of the natural world—in spite of the absence of 'a single finished masterpiece.' Then, however, came what Van Eeden terms a 'mad

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[578] F. Lapidoth. 'Kunst in de Hoofdstad III,' *De Nieuwe Courant*, January 30 1909, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 128.
[579] Giovanni [J. Kalff], *Algemeen Handelsblad*, January 14 1909, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 393.
[580] Kikkert, *Onze Kunst*, XV, p. 97, as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 393.
[581] Jan de Vries and Marijke de Groot, *Van Sintels vuurwerk maken. Kunstkritiek en moderne kunst 1905-1925*, nai010 uitgevers, Rotterdam 2015, p. 73.
[582] Frederik van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval in kunst', in: *Op de Hoogte. Maandschrift voor de huiskamer*, 6(1909)2, p. 79-85, as quoted from: Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.

confusion' in Mondrian's art.[583] Although he greatly admired Van Gogh, Van Eeden posits that Van Gogh may have been to blame for Mondrian's decline—the case of one person's courage, put to brilliant use, having had a detrimental influence on someone less prudent. 'What is certain is that once he threw off all academic constraint, he has taken to daubing in the most abominable style.'[584] The writer outdoes himself in the language of pejoratives, going from there to characterizing the artist's 'stupidity and insensibility.'[585]

Mondrian was so stung by the attack that, decades later, he discussed it with Michel Seuphor, who quotes all of these barbs in his 1956 book. The diatribe had devastated Mondrian in part because of the high esteem in which the fifty-one-year old Frederik van Eeden was held. Ever since the 1880's, Van Eeden had been a popular writer. Trained as a psychiatrist, he wrote novels, plays, and poetry, as well as critical essays that delved into mysticism and social reform, with all his analysis enriched by his medical background.[586] His comments on Mondrian had such an impact because they were made by a serious and accomplished intellectual who had written a rhapsodic article in which he courageously praised Van Gogh as a colorist and an artist of rare determination.[587]

In his defense of Van Gogh, published only a few months after that artist's death, Van Eeden had characterized Van Gogh as 'a brilliant, almost unknown Dutch artist.'[588] The 'brilliant' was such an affront to popular opinion that Van Eeden had had to qualify it by saying he was not opining as an art critic, but was simply giving his 'impression' as an act of 'self-observation.'[589] He took the brave stance that Van Gogh had painted his 'blood red trees, grass green skies, and saffron yellow faces' not because he saw them that way, but for artistic reasons, the realization of which had led Van Eeden to a new understanding. 'It was beautiful because it was right.'[590]

It was Van Eeden's position as an enlightened and progressive thinker that made his attack on Mondrian so damaging. He opens his article in the

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[583] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.
[584] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.
[585] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.
[586] Jan Fontijn, *Tweespalt. Het leven van Frederik van Eeden tot 1901*, Em. Querido's Uitgeverij BV, Amsterdam 1999 (2e dr.), p. 593.
[587] Frederik van Eeden, 'Kunst. Vincent van Gogh', in: *De Nieuwe Gids* 6(1891), p. 263-270. See also Lieske Tibbe, *Verstrengeling van traditie en vernieuwing. Kunstkritiek in Nederland tijdens het fin de siècle 1885-1905*, nai010 uitgevers, Rotterdam 2014, p. 123-129.
[588] Van Eeden, 'Kunst. Vincent van Gogh', p. 263-270.
[589] Van Eeden, 'Kunst. Vincent van Gogh', p. 263-270.
[590] Van Eeden, 'Kunst. Vincent van Gogh', p. 263-270.

February, 1909, *Op de Hoogte* with the provocative remark that people claiming 'not to believe in good and evil' were, nonetheless, always concerned with their own health; moreover, the distinction between beautiful and ugly, while falsely considered 'just a matter of taste,' paralleled the difference of healthy from sick.[591] This is a lead-in to his characterizing Mondrian's work as being like a contagious illness.

Van Eeden continues with a lengthy exegesis which resembles a psychiatric manual in its diagnosis of people who prefer what is ugly to what is beautiful as suffering from a major disorder. The doctor of mental health, writing of these vulgarians of which Mondrian was a prime exemplar, characterizes their 'decadence' and 'decline of taste' as symptomatic of 'degeneration.' When, in the past, such degeneration has permeated 'an entire people for ages, it became 'a chronic epidemic'; when it afflicts 'a single individual for a short period of time,' it is a case of 'an acute sporadic decadence.'[592]

Van Eeden gives an overview of Dutch art in which Rembrandt and Hals embody health and beauty. A disregard for their work—and the consequent taste for Cornelis Troost—denoted a 'terrible decadence epidemic.'[593] The recent ascent of Matthijs Maris and Jozef Israël signified a return to health in the population at large.

Even though Van Gogh discovered and expressed a new form of beauty, regardless of his 'brilliant originality,' Van Eeden believed he 'never reached perfection in his work.' The doctor hoped, however, that the impact of Van Gogh's work would be 'a liberating influence' that would inspire 'young, powerful talents' to continue in the same direction 'with better control and with greater perfection.'[594] This is what Van Eeden had hoped to find in the exhibition of work by Mondrian, Spoor, and Sluijters at the Stedelijk, and why he was so bitterly disappointed.

'Crossing the rooms full with the lifework of the three diligent strivers,' the hopeful art lover had become despondent. 'All three painters are seekers and strivers. Seekers after the unattainable, the original, the genuine, and strivers grappling with their inadequacy of expression [...] Never before have I set eyes on such clear examples of acute decadence. They are what is known in medicine as: typical pathologies. In Mondriaan the decline is tragic and distressing. His original endowment is the greatest and his decline the most extreme.'[595] After damning Mondrian's early work with faint praise—'His view of nature is great and noble. His use of color is splendid at times. But not a single work is mature'—Van Eeden says that, having had his head turned by some outside influence, probably Van Gogh, Mondrian 'lost

[591] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 79.
[592] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 79-80.
[593] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 80.
[594] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 82.
[595] All Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 82.

balance totally.' The decadence is evident 'in a painful orgy of the rawest, most barbaric and lurid colors he could put together.' Van Eeden's pronouncement is that Mondrian has completely lost his 'drawing, composition, and technique.' The resultant art is 'simply mindless, much like unsightly juvenilia. The work of a child indeed, a sick, rebellious child with a few pots of paint to hand.'[596]

Both Mondrian and Sluijters, according to Van Eeden, have come to work in such an egregious way 'because they think this is the most beautiful way to paint. What healthy people think is repulsive, disgusting and hideous, they see it as the true, real beauty.'[597] Yet they had the audacity to consider themselves healthy, and healthy people sick. Van Eeden had never met either one of them. But he had no question of his diagnosis of their severe malady. It was plainly manifest in their grotesque new paintings.

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The critic Israël Querido was even more keyed up by Van Eeden's fury than by *Woods near Oele* itself. Querido, alsmost Mondrian's exact contemporary, was a self-made man who had become someone equal to Van Eeden in affecting public reaction to an artist. The son of a poor Portuguese-Jewish diamond cutter, he had become a competent violinist at a young age and studied philosophy and literature; he was an important figure in intellectual circles, and, an aficionado of Émile Zola, was known for his subtle, incisive writing.[598] He begins his commentary on *Woods near Oele* by declaring that the painting achieves 'conveyance of emotion' more than the representation of visual facts.[599] Make what you want of that defense of a groundbreaking, courageous, and beautiful painting, but to the Dutch public of 1909, this was not praise.

What is extraordinary about *Woods near Oele*, is that it is the quintessential representation of natural effects and that, even if it *evokes* emotion, it does not deliberately flaunt Mondrian's own feelings. *Woods near Oele* demonstrates the opposite of what Querido says; the painter, and his responses, assume a background role. Just as Mantegna's well-known image of Christ in Milan is artistically radical—with its impossible vantage point and extreme foreshortening—yet succeeds in presenting the most plausible dead Jesus, and therefore induces the viewer's emotions, with Mantegna's own feelings irrelevant, the Mondrian canvas captures the splendid truth of light in the woods more than its painter's responses.[600]

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[596] All Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 83.
[597] Van Eeden, 'Gezondheid en verval', p. 83-84.
[598] S.A.J. van Faassen, 'Querido, Israël (1872-1932)', in: *Biografisch woordenboek van Nederland* 1 (1979) (http://resources.huygens.knaw.nl/bwn1880-2000/lemmata/bwn1/querido)
[599] Israël Querido, 'Een schilders-studie. Spoor, Mondriaan en Sluijters', in: *De Controleur*, XIX (May 29 1909), as translated in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 393.
[600] Andrea Mantegna, *The Dead Christ and Three Mourners*, 1470-1474, Pinacoteca Brera, Milan.

Querido's own emotions, however, have been excited, and he goes overboard. The writer is out of control when he tries to analyze the color effects of *Woods near Oele*. 'In Mondrian the result of his Mayday-dream, so-called, is pink trees, golden skies with a purplish haze and a high accent of mauve all over the road, with water reflection, streaked with gold, pink and blue, unwordly light, with a wild flush of colour, entirely visionary in its radiance. It is a gleaming swathe of light which drives and melts, flares up and throbs… Even in the shade there is brightness and a broadly smeared glow of colours.'[601]

Querido goes on to acknowledge those who cannot see all this by adding, 'those who are insensitive simply mutter: madness, pink trees, a green like that of a fence in Zaandam, a gold like wheat, a sky like the train of a garment worn by Loie Fuller.'[602]

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A century later, when *Woods near Oele* is shown or reproduced, no one seems to doubt its worth. In the 2011 Mondrian show at the Centre Pompidou, thousands of viewers stopped every day in front of the large canvas without any of them appearing to question the legitimacy of its style. Whether they saw it above all as light in a forest or as the embodiment of Mondrian's emotions is unknowable, almost everyone looked on appreciatively. What is scandalous and shocking in one époque can be completely respectable in another.

And what is initially upsetting can then be inspiring. While Van Eeden's ad hominem attack upset Mondrian at first, it then emboldened him. It forced him to strengthen his already tough and durable mechanism of self-protection. On the heels of his mother's death, it might have paralyzed him; instead, it increased his resolve and tenacity. His inner resources had been summoned, and so was his will to follow his own beliefs no matter what.

X

In the course of 1908, Mondrian and Aletta de Iongh had begun to see one another frequently, sometimes just the two of them, on other occasions with mutual friends. By April of that year, Mondrian was writing warm letters in which he addressed De Iongh as 'dear sweet Zus'—the Dutch term of affection for 'sister'—and calling himself 'your Piet,' sometimes with 'much love.'[603]

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[601] Querido, 'Een schilders-studie'.
[602] Querido, 'Een schilders-studie'.
[603] Letters Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, Archive of A. de Iongh, Kröller Müller-Museum, Otterlo, inv.nr. KM 120.999; KM 127.381.

Like most of Mondrian's friends, De Iongh was substantially younger than he and from a cultured bourgeois background. Fifteen years his junior, she was the daughter of an attorney. Otherwise, she was quite unlike anyone else he knew, more accomplished and independent than most of the women he encountered at Simon Maris's or at meetings of the Theosophical Society. Having studied violin with the first violinist of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, she was, when Mondrian met her, at the conservatory training to become a professional musician. She would eventually become first violinist of the Residentie Orchestra—using her married name of Aletta Rackwitsz. In 1920, she gained further renown as Princess Juliana's personal violin teacher.[604]

Toward the end of her life, De Iongh would give her trove of letters from Mondrian to Mrs G. E.van der Hucht-Van der Stok, the head nurse of the nursing home Tabitha, in The Hague, where De Iongh knew she was ending her days. Mondrian had written her with the intimacy and honesty one feels with a devoted sibling. They are an invaluable resource on his inner life, and it is wonderful that De Iongh saved them and gave them to the nurse who made them available for others to read.

In February of 1994, Mrs Van der Hucht-Van der Stok donated the letters to the Kröller-Müller Museum, and the director, Evert van Straaten noted that the head nurse had said that De Iongh told her that 'Mondrian was also homosexual.' The 'also' was because De Iongh's husband, the painter Piet Rackwitsz, was, she discovered, homosexual; they never consummated their marriage. Rackwitsz was part of the same social circle as Mondrian in Laren, the village he began to frequent in 1912, and where he lived for almost five years during and after the first world war. It is unclear whether De Iongh was suggesting that Mondrian and her husband were lovers—but perfectly clear that she was certain about Mondrian's sexuality.[605]

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Few people—those he knew during his lifetime, those who have written about him since—thought that Mondrian was homosexual. At age thirty-seven, he began to develop a taste for kissing women, and his style of doing so became well known. His kisses were sometimes of long duration, sometimes completely unexpected by the recipient, always on the lips and intense, the one with Peggy Guggenheim having become part of his legacy, albeit with different versions of the details.[606] By all accounts, his kisses with

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[604] A.P.J. van Osta (ed.), *Drie Vorstinnen: brieven van Emma, Wilhelmina en Juliana*, De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam 1995, p. 144-145.

[605] Evert van Straaten, notes February 22 1994, in Archive A. de Iongh, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.

[606] Cf. Harry Holtzman in: Akiyoshi Tokoro, *Mondrian in New York*, Tokoro, Tokyo 1993, p. 66;

women were one-sided and awkward, but they were, like everything Mondrian did, deeply felt.

At the end of January of 1909, Mondrian met Eva de Beneditty, who is the first woman we know with certainty he kissed. He was thirty-seven, and she was approaching her twenty-first birthday. De Beneditty was tall, strong-willed, and determined, given to stylish silk jackets and fashionable hats, but she was by no definition pretty. Her large nose and exceptionally thick eyebrows were accentuated by her determined gaze; with her heavy hands and big fingers, and powerful physique, she made a mannish impression. This well-heeled heiress lived with her parents in their luxurious apartment near the Concertgebouw. Her father, Abraham Matthias de Beneditty, was a Portuguese Jew who had become prosperous as a securities trader; Eva's mother, Rosalie de Groot, was also from an affluent Jewish family. They forbade their daughter to date the indigent artist.[607]

Whether the De Benedittys cared that he was not Jewish, or whether they thought he was part-Jewish on his mother's side and therefore would have been okay for their daughter if he was not an indigent artist, or whether his being the son of a staunch Calvinist ruled him out, is unknowable. Nor do we know if in his attitude toward Eve de Beneditty, Mondrian's anti-Semitism, as Van den Briel witnessed it toward Van Zwanenbergh and Slijper, simply fell by the wayside when the people in question were fashionable Sephardic Jews as opposed to less chic Ashkenazic or Galician ones. It is also possible that none of this mattered an iota. The senior De Beneditty may have objected to Mondrian's profession, but possibly the reason they forbade their daughter to see Mondrian was his being sixteen years older than her. Regardless of its cause, naturally the parental prohibition only added spark to the romance.

By the start of February, Mondrian and De Beneditty had managed to organize several secret rendez-vous. De Beneditty kept a diary that ran for forty pages about the cavorting that lasted from then through the end of June. She felt swept off her feet by the man she called 'my painter.' He gave her life an unprecedented value.[608]

'He is good and honest and I trust him. I believe him and everything he says; to me he is a rock of truth in my life,' De Beneditty writes in her journal. She was convinced that Mondrian was equally happy to be with her. He gave her a painting he had done of a chrysanthemum, which she considered a memento of his love. She kept the delicate watercolor of a single flower in her bedroom, and whenever she was feeling lonely, she would look at it and dream of the artist's presence.

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[607] Marco Entrop, 'Verliefde ogen zien Mondriaan. Uit het dagboek van Eva de Beneditty', in: *De Parelduiker* 8(2003)1, p. 29.

[608] Marco Entrop quotes extensively from Eva's diary, all following quotations are from Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 28-45.

De Beneditty's son, Paul Huf, would, shortly before he died in 2002, tell an interviewer that his mother never got over the way that Mondrian would kiss her. She had described it to Huf in vivid detail. From Mondrian's studio, the young woman had a view of the clock on the steeple of the Oranjekerk. This allowed her to calculate the time he spent with his lips on hers. An unbroken twenty minutes was the norm, but on occasion the kisses lasted half an hour.[609]

Huf was one of the Netherlands's finest photographers. Known for his black and white publicity portraits of well-known Dutch actors, actresses, athletes, writers, and politicians, he was used to the ways of the world. But he had rarely encountered anyone as rhapsodic as his own mother when she recalled what for many people might have been an endurance test.

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As Abraham and Rosalie de Beneditty became increasingly adamant that their daughter stop seeing Mondrian, the lovers thrilled even more to their illicit liaisons. Eva's diary that March reveals frequent meetings with Mondrian, forbidden and wonderful. While her father and mother objected to the 'painter with a beard, living in an attic and eating rice out of poverty,' she managed behind their backs to return happily and with increased frequency to the attic where she timed his kisses.

By April, however, it all began to change. To De Beneditty's disappointment, Mondrian had less time for her. The spring weather enabled him to resume his excursions by tram and bicycle to his favorite riverbanks and windmills on the city outskirts; he would paint until it was too dark to see, and return to the city too tired to see his girlfriend. Eva records in her diary that on April 11 and 12 he went to Arnhem to spend Easter with his family; it was, after all, the first major holiday following his mother's death. He then became preoccupied with the upcoming exhibition of the St. Lucas Society at the Stedelijk, claiming not to have an hour to spare; on Tuesday, May 11, De Beneditty wrote that Mondrian had 'no time for me at the moment.'[610]

De Beneditty bore 'my painter' no resentment. She had always known that his work was his priority, and accepted the fact. When Mondrian took the time to write her a short letter, she felt nothing but grateful.

#

Then the bloom of romance was on again. Either Mondrian's schedule had truly opened up, or his longing had become more than he could resist. On May 23, he took Eva de Beneditty to a Beethoven concert held in the garden of the Concertgebouw.

The event on a breezy spring evening was utterly magical for the enamored young woman. To her, Mondrian had an alertness and sensitivity unlike anyone else's. Their hours under the stars together were spellbinding.

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[609] Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 37-38. Cf. Scherphuis, *Vrienden*, n.p.
[610] Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 40.

Afterwards, she wrote, 'in the fairy-tale illuminated garden, with the glorious music of Beethoven, interspersed with strange rustlings of the wind in the trees, lovely sea-sounds, and the soft warbling of a few birds that were still awake, which did not disturb the music.'

At some moments, though, nature dominated Beethoven—at least for Mondrian. He was troubled by the sound of the wind in the trees. At first, the painter concentrated on the music 'with eyes cast down, in quiet delight,' but then that wind interrupted his trance-like state. De Beneditty observed him 'glancing up at me now and then, when the sound of the rustling leaves was momentarily heard over the music.'[611] De Beneditty was struck by the refinement of Mondrian's auditory perception equal to his visual acuity. His annoyance at the intrusion of the natural world on the disciplined human performance of the classical composer he liked as much as Mozart, his favorite, showed a rare atunement to all stimulus.

Mondrian in this time period was chronically shifting course. But that heightened awareness to everything he could hear or see would soon lead Mondrian to create an environment where he could work and live with all such stimuli completely under control, and all disturbances eliminated. It would also serve to isolate him from emotional situations he could not handle.

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On June 10, Eva de Beneditty visited Mondrian's studio with her usual anticipation of record-breaking long kisses. She had dreams of what their relationship would become that summer. In the more than two weeks following the concert, she and Mondrian had again been seeing one another frequently.

That evening, her hopes were dashed. Mondrian abruptly announced that by the end of the month he would be leaving for Domburg—and would be away for about eight weeks.

He then handed her a photograph of himself. It had been taken in the studio where they were standing. She knew that the gift symbolized the eventual end of their encounters there. In the photo he was alone with his art.

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The lovers still had a fortnight prior to his departure. Mondrian and De Beneditty met frequently during those two weeks. He was, she noted, 'endlessly lovable.' But she accepted that their relationship was over. On June 24, she wrote, 'he will be able to work in nature to his heart's content, and have a wonderfully peaceful time! Still, he won't be too pleased about not seeeing me for a long while, but he has his art, which takes up all his thoughts, and he will work hard there, and be utterly immersed in it.'[612]

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[611] Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 40.
[612] Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 42.

For over a year, De Beneditty made no reference whatsoever to Mondrian in the diary with which she meticulously recorded her life's events; even when he returned to Amsterdam, they did not see one another.

Then, in October of 1910, she wrote that she had received a letter from her 'old friend the painter.' A month later, she received a second letter. In it, Mondrian is solicitous about her state of mind and informs her she need not reply if she does not feel like it.

Yet Mondrian was not willing to let go. That New Year's, Mondrian asked De Beneditty's nephew, Louis Saalborn, who was his painting student— and probably had introduced them initially—to tell her how eager he was to see her again. She told Mondrian's intermediary that she refused. The idea of such a reunion was more than she could bear; they would never meet again.[613]

#

Eva de Beneditty was, we assume, protecting herself because she was so in love with Mondrian and could not bear being hurt any further. She had found out that on April 27, 1909, precisely in the middle of the time period when De Beneditty and Mondrian were having their clandestine meetings in his studio, just after he told her that he was so busy painting and preparing for the St. Lucas exhibition that he could not see her for a while, he and twenty-five-year-old Margaretha Louise Heijbroek signed the guest book of her family's home in Laren together. Greta Heijbroek, twelve years Mondrian's junior, was the younger sister of his friend M.J. Heijbroek, an Amsterdam banker who collected Mondrian's work. By the spring of 1909, she had become Mondrian's student, and perhaps there was nothing more to their connection when they traveled to Laren together. But, by the fall of 1911, Heijbroek and Mondrian would be engaged to marry. When Eva de Beneditty saw Mondrian for the last time in her life in June of 1909, she had not known that Heijbroek existed. Finding out that Mondrian had in fact been seeing the other woman—whatever the extent of their relationship—while saying he was so consumed with his work that he had no time for her, was more than Eva de Beneditty could tolerate.

XI

In those same months when Eva was pining for him and he was seeing his future fiancée, Mondrian was making and breaking dates with Aletta de Iongh. On one day that spring when he was juggling his complex social life, he wrote De Iongh with instructions to postpone a visit scheduled a few days hence. He had, he explained, painted a wall of his studio black, and the material used had an unbearable odor. He suggested that they meet at a later date, and change the location to a café near the St. Lucas exhibition, which

[613] Entrop, *Verliefde ogen*, p. 43.

would by then have opened and which they could go see together.[614] Even though De Iongh was not a "girlfriend," he was probably desperate to keep her away from his studio because he was already having enough trouble controlling the arrrivals and departures of Eva de Beneditty and Greta Heijbroek.

He then canceled the café encounter with De Iongh. He wrote her one morning saying that he was leaving for Domburg that afternoon—with Spoor—to find a place to stay later in the summer.[615] It was the same trip to Domburg with which had blown off Eva de Beneditty.

There were other women in the line-up as well. Like Eva de Beneditty and Greta Heijbroek, Agatha Zethraeus also believed she would marry Mondrian.

Zethraeus had, in the previous two years, been a student of Mondrian's. We know little about his teaching, except that periodically he gave lessons to groups of women or the children of people who collected his art; he never did so regularly. Zethraeus was unlike the others who thought she was going to become Mondrian's wife; the daughter of a Swedish immigrant and a Dutch woman, she was Mondrian's exact age and a successful painter, a fellow-member of Arti et Amicitae and St. Lucas. Her style of painting remained traditional throughout her life—she would live until 1966—and she produced landscapes and still-lifes typical of the Hague School. She and Mondrian would remain in touch for a long time, and she would visit Mondrian in Paris in 1928. Unfortunately none of the Mondrian researchers working during her lifetime learned more than that she thought they were going to get married.[616]

The same is said of Marie Simon. Mondrian knew her from the Theosophical Society. Unfortunately all we know about her is that she told people that she and Mondrian might wed, and that when he moved to Paris in 1912, she arranged for him initially to stay in the Theosophical Society building.[617]

It would be nice to know more about all of these relationships. My own hunch is that Mondrian was not the lothario his appointment book suggests. I imagine him perpetually one step shy of actualizing his relationships into love affairs, but you may think otherwise. In that time period, most middle-class women did not lose their virginity until they were married. Of that brief period at the start of 1909, when he was seeing all these women who found him immensely appealing, the only detail that is known is that with

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[614] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 128.
[615] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 128.
[616] 'According to family tradition […] Agatha Zethraeus (1872-1966) who is said to have received art lessons from and considered herself engaged to Mondrian' in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 415. Cf. Katjuscha Otte, Ingelies Vermeulen, Jan van den Braak, *Agatha Zethraeus (1872-1966). Vriendin, leerling en model van Piet Mondriaan*, Mondriaanhuis, Amersfoort 2014.
[617] Bax, *De passies*, p.36-38.

one of them he practiced his unusual kissing technique. Given their social backgrounds, and the mores of the day, it's unlikely that he had sex with any of them.

This period when he was seeing Eva de Beneditty, Greta Heijbroek, and Aletta de Iongh, while squeezing in meetings with Agatha Zethraeus and Marie Simon, and then traveled to Domburg with Cornelis Spoor, was during the first half of the same year when over two hundred of Mondrian's paintings and drawings was being seen by the public at the Stedelijk, and he was posthumously vilified for skipping his mother's funeral because he was too busy with the exhibition. In fact, what was probably driving him more than anything else as he managed the daily scheduling required of a Casanova was that, suddenly, Johanna Mondrian was no longer alive.

XII

The letters to Aletta de Iongh show Mondrian as he would be lifelong. He organized his daily encounters meticulously, and was invariably calm and courteous. Right up to his death, Mondrian would use letter-writing to make all plans—with collectors and gallerists as well as the few people he saw socially. Scheduling their visits to him—he was rarely the one who ventured out—and addressing a range of issues concerning the selling of paintings, he was infallibly polite and in command. He avoided the telephone even when it became most people's preferred method of communication.[618] Letters suited him better. He could compose his thoughts in solitude, and correct himself before letting anyone else witness his thoughts. There were no immediate responses to contend with, no interruptions. When he was actually with other people, he was more inclined to discourse than conversation; with letters, he could control what he said and never be challenged.

Numerous files of Mondrian's correspondence remain, especially from his late years—in Paris, London, and New York. He wrote dry but pleasant letters, most with the same objectives of determining exactly when, and for how long, encounters would last, or when, and for how much money, a payment would be coming for a painting. He was as respectful of the needs of others to be precise about timing and expenses as he was cognizant of his own wish for order and predictability. He was consistently even-tempered and gracious, making any dealing with him pleasant.

Aletta de Iongh was the first person to save Mondrian's letters to her, and they have much the same tenor of what Mondrian would write to various art dealers, as well as fellow painters, who kept the letters he wrote over the next thirty-five years. With this gifted violinist he encountered at

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[618] According to Seuphor 'he could not operate a telephone'. Seuphor, *Overpeinzingen*, p. 17.

age thirty-seven as with all who followed, he maintained a certain tone: polite, even-tempered, and solicitous of the recipient's needs. Mondrian conducted his daily affairs with the balance, intelligence, and grace that were among the goals of his mature art. He showed no ego or greed; his communication was in concert with his underlying, pervasive wish to bring charm to other people's lives. He bowed to no one—he knew what he needed and wanted, and would never grovel or be obsequious—but he did not ruffle feathers. Hardly ever is there a trace of a conflict or an antagonistic situation. His placid attitude was unusual among artists who navigate in the world of galleries and who dealt with the different factions of this or that movement involving hellbent painters and architects and critics. Mondrian kept a lighthearted tone, and he deliberately kept from being too emotionally engaged; one could by no means say the same for Le Corbusier or Josef Albers or Theo van Doesburg or many of the other modernists who vented their spleen and went into panogerics of rage. Mondrian placed a premium on temper and balance. Perhaps his reserve and reticence were characteristically Dutch, but he was neither dour nor hard; rather, he had the delicacy he would apply to his art.

With Aletta de Iongh, however, Mondrian was less guarded and more revealing than with other people. For one thing, he let his mocking humor show. In one of the earliest letters he addressed to 'Dear Zus' and signed 'your Piet,' he writes, 'This morning the "skullmeter" was at my house. He saw those sketches of you, and found your forehead so fine and the expression of your eyes so lovely, he was keen to get a photo of you.'[619]

The person for whom he invented that nickname, the German phrenologist Alfred Waldenburg, had written a thesis at the University of Frankfurt on skull construction, and had gone to Amsterdam in 1909 to measure the heads of Portuguese Jews.[620] Mondrian tells De Iongh that Waldenburg will be there on Sunday, that she should come to his studio if she wants, that she should be aware that 'the skull meter' might take longer than promised to give her a print of his study of her head—'and he may later put you in a book: I'm just alerting you, but you can do as you like.'[621] Mondrian calls another of their mutual acquaintances the polyp. The acidic characterizations, the protective instinct toward his friend, and the precision with which he organizes time, are true to form for Mondrian as he would always be. He was trenchant and savvy; he stayed above the fray because he was amused rather than angered by most human weakness, and rarely judged other people.

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[619] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, no date [summer 1909], KM 120.999.
[620] Lien Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp. Schilders, schrijvers en werelverbeteraars in Laren en Blaricum 1880-1920,* Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1994, p.172-173.
[621] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, no date [summer 1909], KM 120.999.

XIII

On May 25, 1909, Piet Mondrian, age thirty-seven, became member 'N° 1690' of the Dutch Theosophical Society.[622] The small organization, created nearly thirty-four years earlier, was reserved only for the most dedicated adherents of the faith. The 'skullmeter,' Waldenburg, who was also a Theosophist, took a photograph of Mondrian that spring where the artist epitomizes the style of adherents to occult beliefs: a generic guru or Eastern prophet. With his long hair and arm gestures and hand positions, he had transformed himself. Ten years earlier, Mondrian had dressed in the correct suits and starched collars of the bourgeoisie who were his client base. Five years earlier, he had worn the same cut of jacket as his farmer friends in the Brabant countryside. Having now adopted a very different persona, he was true to what would be a lifelong pattern. In appearance and clothing, Mondrian would periodically try a new image.

In June, he painted an entire wall of his studio with the black paint that smelled so foul that he used it as a reason to disinvite Aletta de Iongh from even entering the place.[623] In Brabant he had darkened his home with the leather screen that cast a warm glow in reflected light, and hung a abundance of copper objects, but this was a very different move to create an environment that would succor him. Mondrian wanted to seal himself in, in a setting that no woman would find inviting.

For the rest of his life, his will to inhabit a living space different from anyone else's, denuded of sentiment, impersonal yet individualistic to his own self, was as powerful as his drive to intensify the colors and distill the forms of his art.

Even his fellow painters, did not go that far. The pitch-black darkness of his studio wall shocked them. Twenty years later, at the Dessau Bauhaus, Wassily Kandinsky would paint one of his dining room walls that same matte black, and again people would react in shock.[624] They assumed it had never been done before. Mondrian's contemporaries at the Bauhaus knew him and his work by then, and honored him by making him one of the first artist to be the subject of a monograph published at the school, but it is unlikely that even Kandinsky knew that he had faced pure blackness well before anyone else had.[625] By the 1920s, Mondrian's art was well known, but he was a person without a past, a deity but not a friend.

XIV

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[622] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 128.
[623] Cf. Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers, p. 52.*
[624] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 242.
[625] Piet Mondrian, *Neue Gestaltung. Neoplastizismus. Nieuwe Beelding*, Albert Langen Verlag, München 1925 (= Bauhausbücher 5).

Later that summer of 1909, Mondrian and Spoor returned to Domburg. They stayed longer than the previous year, this time they became residents at the Pension Wisse located Ooststraat 4a, named after the operators Mr. and Mrs. Wisse. If you are wondering about Mondrian's personal life, and his male companion of the previous year, I haven't a clue beyond the known facts. Van den Briel visited them, and found Mondrian happy to be in the company of amiable friends at the summer resort. A bachelor at thirty-seven, he was painting, socializing more than before, and, new to him, practicing silent meditation. He would repair on the beach for long periods in perfect Buddha posture.[626]

What we also know for sure is that Mondrian had added reason to want to center himself and escape everyday reality. Mondrian was struggling with his health. In a letter to Aletta de Iongh from Domburg that summer, he said he was unable to paint because of an unspecified illness.[627] Ever since his pneumonia in 1900, which he attributed to a swim in the cold sea off of Cornwall, he had suffered from frequent colds and respiratory problems; they were apparently worsening. For the rest of Mondrian's life, his letters to others would reveal numerous two or three-week long periods when he was out of commission, sometimes seriously ill. He also often had digestive difficulties. He was constantly trying to remedy both the colds with flu symptoms and the intestinal issues by diet, but nothing alleviated his frequent incapacity from bouts of illness.

You will not find it mentioned in any of the other texts on Mondrian to date that he was plagued, repeatedly, by health problems. Other people would probably have found his bronchial and digestive problems completely debilitating; he suffered numerous periods when he was unable to work, but he always rebounded, making art that epitomizes good health. Rather than reflect bodily, or psychological, discomfort, Mondrian's paintings, from the landscapes to the abstractions, celebrate bounty. All the elements work in happy relationships. Mondrian's real suffering and wish to rise above his actual circumstances made him want to live, with brush and pigment, in a situation that was salubrious, and robust.

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Salvador Dalí, in *Diary of a Genius*, tells us, repeatedly, what sort of bowel movement he has had on the morning of the day about which he is writing.[628] A substantial, solid b. m. guaranteed major artistic production; a

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[626] 'Die malle Mondriaan en zijn Buddha-houdingen pal-midden op 't strand', as Charley Toorop, daughter of Jan Toorop, remembers. See Bax, *De passies*, p. 40.

[627] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, no date [summer 1909], KM 117.523.

[628] For instance: 'As usual, a quarter of an hour after breakfast, I slip a jasmine flower behind my ear and go to the toilet. I have hardly sat down before I have a bowel movement that is almost odourless.'; 'This morning an exceptional defecation: two small turds in the shape of rhinoceros horns. Such a scanty

few farts and minimal product meant that he should not even attempt to paint. Kenneth Clark, we know from his gifted biographer Meryle Secrest, was constantly affected by the way his wife Jane was plagued by sinus problems, rendering her unable to function and exacerbating her alcoholism, that incurable sinusitis and chronic drunkenness impacting Lord Clark on a daily basis.[629] Biographers usually neglect their subject's everyday reality. One's physical state has a powerful impact, moreso than say, one's great grandfather's profession, which is the sort of things most biographers dwell upon. Either because the subject is affected directly by his immediate situation, or deliberately renders it secondary, these facts count, inestimably. Now, in Domburg, in that summer of 1909, his mother's death and all of his romantic entanglement recent history, Mondrian was feeling better physically, but thwarted by the weather. He writes, 'It's quite wholesome here. Although it hasn't been the best place for working: very cold and wet.' He was, however, full of optimism. The natural panorama put him in high spirits. 'The sea is wonderful, but you know that. The whole region in fact is so pleasant and pure, I still plan to make some beautiful things here.'[630]

The role of the seashore was as monumental as his own inner workings, and his will to respond to it, and let it supercede other issues, defined him. Having grown up landlocked, and now, returning to the coast and seeing the broad ocean, Mondrian renewed his joyous vision of earthly existence. While he fastened on local sights of which he made repeated versions—the churches, windmills, and lighthouses of the nearby villages, which he visited often on foot or by bicycle—what captivated him more than anything else, and inspired his most spectacular paintings, were the dunes. That second summer in Domburg, he painted with unprecedented verve.

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When bright summer days occured, Mondrian set himself up to paint on *Hoge Hil*, an elevated promontory looking out over the Domburg Dunes and the sea. Facing the expanse of ocean, Mondrian positioned himself in a completely different way than he had in the woods. Rather than being within the sacred place, as he had been when encased by trees in the forest, now he gave himself a vantage point that was high and afar. His perch overlooked sweeping views of the beach and of the water that was sometimes calm and mirror-like, at other moments turbulent. Mondrian painted on cardboard, which meant that he could still work in oil without requiring an easel. He applied the pigment quickly and lightly, the results looking deceptively like pastel. In this abbreviated style, Mondrian captured to perfection the panorama of solid land, shifting sands, sea, and sky.

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stool worries me.' Salvador Dali, *Diary of a Genius*, Picador, London 1976, p. 43; 59.

[629] Meryle Secrest, *Kenneth Clark: A Biography*, Holt, Rhinehart and Winston, New York 1984.

[630] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, no date [summer 1909], KM 117.523.

The locations—within, for the woods, and from afar, for the dunes and sea—while determined by physical necessicity, enabled Mondrian to reveal the different subjects in all their power and majesty. He had placed himself to render maximum homage to nature. And on this second summer idyll in Domburg, once the weather conditions calmed down and his own health had improved, Mondrian made a painting that was a new "summa" in his capacity to express his reverence for the givens of the cosmos. With the ocean's edge in front of him, his painterly imagination took a leap in concord with the profound personal awakening he was experiencing that summer. He had been nurturing certain passions and beliefs since childhood, and Theosophy had helped crystalize them. Madame Blavatsky's approach to earthly existence was the vehicle that enabled him to realize in a new way his desire to paint the all and everything of existence.

In *Sea after Sunset*—a large, brilliantly scene he painted that August—Mondrian evokes the moment that only occurs once a month when low tide coincides with the last moment of daylight.[631] While high tide, covering the complex sea floor with the pure and consistent surface of the water, presents a more uniform sight, low tide, which reveals mysterious layers of seaweed and rock and shifting sand, offers the sense of natural workings stripped of their cover. Its added complexity at the time in the monthly cycle when it is bathed in soft evening sunlight, rather than cast in darkness or illuminated by midday brightness, animated Mondrian to rare effect. In *Sea after Sunset*, he summed up the sight by applying boldly simple dashes of intense color on the board with tremendous, consuming energy. These vibrant bullets are angled to soar. They assume their power with balletic grace; Mondrian was developing the capacity to combine complete assuredness with exquisite lightness.

Some of what the dashes convey is purely natural: the sky, the distant sea, and the strip of shoreline only just now exposed, having been covered by ocean water until a few moments ago when the tide began to recede. But these dexterous staccato strokes also established the distinctly man-made elements of the view that testify to the human effort to come to grips with the furies of nature. The predominant device is the pile of sand extending outward at the right-hand side of the natural sandbar. These constructions dotted the Zeeland coast to control flooding and stabilize the land mass at risk of being washed away.

Mondrian had leapt forward in his way of painting. He had seen the principles of Pointillism in the new work of Jan Toorop. Toorop had been in Paris, where he was exposed to radical means of making art. Recently he had had a large exhibition in Amsterdam, and he had by now been in Domburg for many summers. Toorop's work incorporated the technique developed by Seurat, and subsequently explored by Paul Signac and other

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[631] A693 *Sea after Sunset*, 1909, oil on cardboard, 62,5 x 74,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

artists in France. It had been labeled "Pointillism" after the fact because it employed strong small dots of solid color to build up the overall composition.[632] Yet Mondrian did not imitate Toorop's or anyone else's style. Rather, he took the approach in his own direction. Toorop's pictures of the period have the look of someone following a trend; they are exuberant, but overly pretty in their colors, and lacking fiber and grit. Mondrian injected Pointillism with firecracker energy. He applied the new method with singular intensity and consuming engagement. Even though it was Toorop, worldlier and better traveled, who set him on his course, Mondrian gives his coastal scene a cohesiveness absent in Toorop's paintings. He imbues every color with maximum strength, creates rapid movement and lively rhythm, and awakens the viewer to the forces of the universe.

Sea after Sunset has the hallmarks that would underlie the pure abstract compositions Mondrian would make fifteen years later. It overtly displays the processes of manmade art while presenting the cosmos as being greater than any of us. Its sheer energy and perpetual motion invigorates the viewer, and colors penetrate our souls. Transforming us, this oil on cardboard anticipates the work in which Mondrian would no longer represent a known sight. By the time when he went on to make his greatest abstractions, he would be more intellectual and rational, and would constantly be refining his vision in the sanctity of his studio, rather than working spontaneously as the daylight faded and the sea lapped the nearby shore, but the gist is still the same: Mondrian infused his art with love.

XV

Some people liked this new art Mondrian began to make following the Stedelijk show and the jolt of his mother's death; others loathed it. In July of 1909, his submission was turned down by an exhibition of Works of Art by Living Masters in Arnhem.[633] One of his flower paintings, however, was included in the annual Arti show, and he also had paintings in the St. Lucas exhibition. The ones at St. Lucas were the last straw for his Uncle Frits. Now more outraged than ever, Frits told critics that he no longer would have anything at all to do with his 'depraved nephew.'[634]

In 1914, Mondrian would write the art critic Hendricus Peter Bremmer that this is why he changed the spelling of his name at that time. He omitted

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[632] For the origins and development of Seurat's pointillist technique, see William Innes Homer, *Seurat and the Science of Painting*, The MIT Press, Camebridge MA 1964.
[633] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 129.
[634] Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 172.

'the a because my Uncle thought that it was to his disadvantage to have the same name.'[635]

This detail of Mondrian's life story is more than any other fact, what most sources get wrong. It is reported in endless books and catalogues that Mondrian changed the spelling of his name three years later, in 1912, when he moved to Paris. The popular, but incorrect, version of history is that he streamlined "Mondriaan" to go with his new way of life in a more modern studio. The truth is that the dropping of the "a" had been initially imposed on him, even if the new form of his name also suited him in its trimness and crisper rhythm than the old.[636]

#

Frits Mondriaan had first identified himself as an artist rather than a merchant on a census taken in 1901. By then, his wife, Josephine Marie Desiree, had taken over the store so that he could devote himself full-time to painting. In 1909, their son assumed the helm. As different as Frits and Piet's current work was, Piet revered his uncle as the person who trained him. He had not forgotten that his own early oil sketches of the Dutch countryside had initially born such a strong resemblance to his uncle's that most people could not discern who had done which. Frits was not merely Piet's father's brother. Among all the blood relatives on either side of the family, he was the one closest to Piet. The sting must have been an emotional trauma. Piet was invariably taciturn referring to the name change that was dictated to him, but his true reaction to it was another side of life to hide.

#

Just how much uncle and nephew did have in common gets clear when looking at them side by side. Frits's work is lackluster, while Piet's early work has an urgency to it. Piet's paintings conform to the reigning academic tradition of late nineteenth-century Netherlands much as Frits's do, but Frits's paintings are like well-crafted furniture, more polished and professional than Piet's, while Piet's, even with the demerit of being clumsy, has the charm of being raw. At the beginning, Piet did have as good a grasp as his uncle did of the rules of drawing and shading and perspective, but he already painted with a muscularity that is, depending on your taste, either refreshing or uncouth. Piet shows brushwork as a physical act, and presents oil pigment as undisguised paint from the tube. Frits, meanwhile, deliberately conceals the techniques of painting to achieve a seamless presentation of sun-dappled grass and white clouds against luminous blue skies.

The dates of certain paintings remind us that, after Piet moved, at age twenty, to Amsterdam, he would often return to Winterswijk in the summertime when his uncle was also visiting, and they would paint side by

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[635] Letter from Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, April 8 1914, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19.

[636] Cf. note 12 in first chapter of this book.

side. Piet would never voice, at least publicly, anything but respect for Frits, and gratefulness for his uncle's tutelage, even after Frits demanded that his modernist nephew alter the family name. Mondrian would always name Frits as his most important teacher and influence.

#

In 1912, the critic N.H. Wolf, writing in the magazine *De Kunst*, would compare the work of uncle and nephew when reviewing a show at the Van Delden Gallery in Amsterdam. Writing of Frits, Wolf declares, 'He is an experienced man and therefore knows that when all is said and done the public prefers a well-finished painting in a well-chosen frame.'[637] Like a caricature of a gentleman artist who courts his rich patrons in stories by Oscar Wilde and Somerset Maugham, Wolf's portrait of Mondrian's uncle is the dapper craftsman/merchant churning out exactly what his fashionable clients desire. Frits had not made much of a leap from being the hairdresser who could weave the most suitable wig for a client to the painter who knew how to please. In both professions, he had the requisite skill in his métier to fulfill his objectives. But, as Wolf, astutely observes, Frits's artistic priorities were the opposite of what his nephew's had become. 'Things are somewhat different with Frits Mondriaan's nephew, Piet Mondriaan. Last year he switched to cubism, and at the Modern Art Circle's exhibition which is due to open at the Stedelijk Museum tomorrow we shall probably be regaled with his newest creations. […] I venture to assert that nephew Piet's notions of art are still just as far removed from those of his uncle Frits as they ever were, perhaps even further!"[638]

In his native country, Mondrian would have to endure these comparisons for decades to come, even if his international audience did not even know Frits existed. In 1930, when Piet could hardly afford to eat in Paris, and Frits, at age 77, officially retired as a painter, there was an article in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*. It begins 'Frits Mondriaan (not to be confused with his modernist name sake!) is certainly no stranger to lovers of Dutch painting. For more than thirty years his paintings have graced our important exhibitions; he has a resounding reputation in the artistic world. Mondriaan is one of the last to carry on the great tradition of our impressionistic landscape painting.'[639] For many people like the popular critic who wrote this, Frits was the master of the two. Even if the canon of art history today emphasizes de Stijl and the modernism that was born in the Netherlands between the two world wars, at the time that the revolution was actually occurring, the majority of art critics and collectors in that prosperous country, resoundingly conservative, preferred Frits. And the larger public would never have remotely entertained the idea that Piet Mondrian's name

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[637] N.H. Wolf, 'Frits Mondriaan', in: *De Kunst*, 1912/13, vol. V, as translated in: Henkels, Mondrian, p. 154.
[638] Wolf, *Frits Mondriaan*, in Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 154.
[639] NRC, January 18 1930, translated in Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 155.

would some day be revered worldwide and Frits's all but forgotten. No one would have suspected that the relative from whom Frits went to such lengths to separate himself is the only reason most people today have any idea who the former haberdasher was.

#

Mondrian was unusual in the way he assumed the position as black sheep of the family as he was in rest of his conduct. Usually an ostracized relative laments his plight, and rages or wines. Not our Piet. He was calm and graceful about being disowned by his closest relative. Not only did Mondrian, lifelong, volunteer, appreciatively, that Frits had taught him to paint, without an iota of bitterness toward the uncle, but while most rebels make their struggles against old-fashionedness part of their story, and delight in recounting their challenges, he never told the many journalists who wrote about him the real reason he changed his name. His uncle's insistence on his dropping the second "a" has never really been part of his known history.[640] Mondrian never said this in public, and we only know about this unusual request because he revealed it in the letter he wrote Bremmer two years after the fact.

A more ordinary person would never forgive his uncle. Frits was not satisfied simply to critique his former acolyte's development as an abstract painter; he attacked all that Mondrian believed in, tried to relegate him to the role of an outsider, and tried in effect to keep him from selling the new paintings on which his daring nephew depended to survive. Mondrian never made a single swipe back. Rather, he just expressed gratefulness, lifelong, for what was best in the relationship he had with the other professional artist in his family. He credited his betrayor with his own artistic know-how and as a role model who revealed that it was possible to live with the making of art as one's job. Frits's art, compared to his own, was timid and fuddy-duddy, and the moment when Piet realized he had to escape its shackles must have been tough sledding, but he never discussed his own experience.

Frits was like an interior decorator mired in historicism and eager to accommodate rich people's taste. Piet treated the act of painting as an all-or-nothing existential experience. He sacrificed material's comforts to make art on his own terms. Frits not only failed to support him; he denounced his nephew when Piet could not afford it. Piet's way of coping was to comply with the name change absent argument, go his own way, and eventually give a reason for dropping the "a" that reflected badly on no one. Most family rebels proudly declare what they achieved, and deride what they rejected. Piet would never waste his time in that way. He did not care about "his story." At the end of his life, he would lose that equanimity and diabolize his father—either that, or the people writing about Mondrian inferred that

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[640] Although Joosten quotes the letter while discussing 'Signature, Dating and Mondrian's Inscriptions' in the "Introduction" to the *Catalogue Raisonné of the Cubist and Abstract Works*, p. 194.

the same Pieter Sr. who helped set up his son to study art in Amsterdam had tried to prevent his doing so, but in general he was so determined to avoid conflict, and find the same give-and-take equanimity that he made the basis of his art, that he eschewed bitterness and vendetta, in almost always all his personal relationships.

XVI

Declarations of who influenced their subject are one of the favorite crutch of art historians.

The literature on Mondrian goes overboard. For this period when he began using bolder, brighter colors and made a breakthrough with simplified, muscular brush work that put him on the route toward complete abstraction, academics credit Jan Toorop, Kees van Dongen, Jan Sluijters, and a slew of other contemporaries, as his sources of inspiration. Mondrian's work from the years when his summer visits to Domburg affected most of what he painted back in Amsterdam is often shown alongside that of the other painters, all lesser known, who also frequented the beach resort. The goal is to emphasize all that Mondrian had in common with his confrères. The literature of art history treats him as part of a movement, the other two painters with whom he showed at the Stedelijk also members.

I need to explain why I hardly touch on these connections, since my failure to do so will surely raise the hackles of traditional, academic art historians, should they read this book. And if the "scholars" have not chucked it into the waste before reaching the sections when I would be expected to accord great significance to assorted De Stijl groupies, and then, later, geometric abstractionists like Burgoyne Diller and the rest of the usual suspects, they will be even more shocked.

I say little about these other artists because I don't think they mattered a lot to Mondrian. This is not only because he never discussed them. Mondrian did not bother to understate or deny the influence of his contemporaries because of his own ego; their impact did not enter his discourse because it was inconsequential or nil. Certainly Mondrian looked at what other people were doing, and on the surface he and they had certain stylistic similarities, but the parallels stop there. His intensity, his originality, and his genius set him apart. He would never claim as such; he did not need to. He did not waste his time on rivalry. He existed on some very different sphere from most people. His goals, for himself and the world, were of a magnitude that renders pointless the comparisons to his fellow artists on superficially similar trajectories.

#

I was once present in the Albers household when the Director of the Yale University Art Gallery had the rare priviledge of looking at some of Josef's early lithographs with the artist himself.

'How wonderful,' the museum director said. He appeared to mean it, and was smiling with astonishment. This expert on Hans Baldung Grien was not just being diplomatic; he was palbably moved, in particular by a 1917 self-portrait lithograph by the painter best known for his *Homages to the Square*. 'I can see how important Kirchner was to you.'

If Josef, at age eighty-seven, had been physical capable of so doing, I think he would have picked up the distinguished museum head, carried him to the front door, and thrown him out of the house.

Sure, Albers and Kirchner, two German artists born toward the end of the nineteenth century both invested the lagged lines of their figure drawings with intense physical animation and emotional engagement, and have certain things in common: no doubt. But the character and desires of Albers and Kirchner as individuals could hardly have been less alike. Regardless of a superficial resemblance in their work, what they wanted to show or not show of their personal experience, and the feelings they wanted to induce in the viewers of their art, were opposite. To Albers, the claim that Kirchner had an impact on him was a criminal offense.

It is not only because Albers and Mondrian knew and liked one another and had a lot in common that I am wary of the claims of the influence of other artists you will find in other Mondrian texts. I have always felt that this "who influenced who", which is the essence of my trade, is fundamentally wrong.

But I am struck, after many years of considering Mondrian and of reading all the links people make between his work and that of many other artists, by an unexpected realization. Every good artist I have come to know in depth—Balthus, Leland Bell, Louisa Matthíasdóttir, Josef Albers, and Anni Albers among them—either mocked or blew up about the comparisons between their work and that of certain of their contemporaries. Balthus laughed uproariously at the parallels claimed in various books between him and Christian Schad; Leland Bell deemed it imbecilic when he was put in the same cannon as William Bailey and Philip Pearlstein; Louisa Matthíasdóttir simply made her quiet 'how ridiculous' smile at being grouped with Jane Freilicher; Josef railed out in particular at the notion that his late geometric work had anything whatsoever to do with the Minimalists; Anni Albers saw nothing in Agnes Martin's work and was annoyed when people related it to her own.

So while Mondrian had colleagues who worked in a similar vein to him—and in the case of Bart van der Leck gleaned a particular technique which, he acknowledged happily, helped him advance in his own work—by instinct I have little inclination to say that any of the work he saw his colleagues do meant a lot to him. But what has now taken me by surprise is the awareness

that he never cared when people made comparisons. It simply did not bother him. It is one of the ways he was truly zen.

Periodically, throughout history, there have been artists who, even if they are to some degree in the mode of their times, even though they belong to the era and place in which they lived, are so original, and have such genius, that they are in a totally different league. A disproportionate emphasis or presentation of the lesser stuff going on around them is not only misguided, but shows a blindness to the values that make the highest level of art one of the peaks of human existence. Mondrian fit into that top tier. Presumably, he knew that Toorop, Spoor, and Sluijters were simply not of his same artistic caliber. Yet, at the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, they too were certainly making artistic breakthroughs and were almost invariably mentioned alongside him. Critics and the public saw them as a group. I used to think that Mondrian stayed mute because he was too tactful and polite to declare his own superiority. I now think the reason he did not react was because he genuinely felt nothing about the categorizations. He did not have that sort of ego.

Mondrian was not going to announce his artistic superiority over the other Domburg painters any more than he would compare his own work to Uncle Frits's. But why was there hardly any art critic at the time who had the vision and courage to acknowledge that when one sees Mondrian's work of 1908-10 next to paintings of similar subjects by his contemporaries, Mondrian's has an atmosphere, an authentic sense of space, and a sense of air circulating that is absent in theirs? Even if elements of the work being done by some of his Dutch contemporaries who, unlike him, had the means to go to Paris—where they saw seminal paintings by Seurat, Braque, and Derain firsthand—had a superficial resemblance to Mondrian's, Sluijters and Van Dongen did not have nearly as strong effect on him as Van Gogh, visibly, artists as distant in time as Pieter Saenredam and Jacob van Ruisdael. This was the echelon in which Mondrian belonged. However cognizant he was of what his contemporaries were doing, he developed primarily according to his goals and standard—akin to those of the masters of every era—not the trends.

#

Jan Toorop was the only one of his contemporaries whose style truly gave Mondrian some new ideas, and is the one instance where the question of influence warrants attention. In the St. Lucas spring exhibition held in May and June of 1908, where four of Mondrian's more traditional works were on view, seventeen of Toorop's paintings were presented.[641] Their daring and advanced style opened Mondrian's eyes to new possibilities of how to paint.

Toorop, who was fifty years old to Mondrian's thirty-six, was born on Java, and came to the Netherlands as a child. He was influenced by a lot of

[641] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 127. Cf. Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 66-69.

recent developments in European paintings—first Manet, then Ensor, then the Symbolists and Pointillists. Many of Mondrian's contemporaries imitated one or another of Toorop's styles and his incorporation of the breakthroughs of these other artists into his own painting.[642] Mondrian, who knew a lot of Toorop's disciples, probably met the older artist in 1908, but it was only in the summer of 1909, in Domburg, that the two spent some time together.

Van den Briel visited Mondrian that summer.[643] He writes that Mondrian liked to watch Toorop work, carefully observing the older painter's technique. Mondrian's portraits of some local Zeeland characters, as well as his paintings of the church at Domburg and of the lighthouse at Westkapelle—a village next to Domburg—and further canvases of dunes, are all in a Pointillist style that reflects Toorop's technique.[644]

Mondrian's Pointillism was his own variation of the style, however. The student then did better with the technical advances than had the master from whom he gleaned them. Toorop and the other Pointillists in this generation after Seurat used the dots of color essentially as a decorative motif. They dabbed the dots lightly, suggesting refracted luminosity; the impression is of weightlessness rather than structure. Mondrian's dots have more meat to them. They pulsate, giving the surfaces of the lighthouse paintings a perpetual up-down, left-right movement. The small solid dashes make the building walls vibrate in brilliant sunlight while simultaneously establishing how massive they are. In a season when Mondrian was prolific, he was laying on the paint forcefully, giving his paintings confidence and authority.

Mondrian also completed some paintings of simple trees in 1909 which, while they were overtly essays in "Pointillism" derived from Toorop's method, have a Herculean energy that is Mondrian's alone. The intense short dashes that radiate from the an apple tree in all directions in *Apple Tree, Pointillist Version* imbue the tree with a resonating force that goes out beyond the four corners of the cardboard to the furthest reaches of the universe.[645]

This painting encapsulates a physical act more than the single appearance of an apple tree. Mondrian appears to have started where the trunk emerges

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[642] For instance Otto van Rees, Jan Sluijters and Leo Gestel. See Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 7-13;17-19;38-40;59-66.

[643] 'In '09 heb ik een week of 3 in Domburg gelogeerd in hetzelfde kosthuis als M. en Spoor woonden', letter Van den Briel to Welsh, in Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 88.

[644] A675 *Zeeuws(ch)e Boer*, 1909- early 1910, oil on canvas, 69 x 53 cm, Gemeentemuseum; A681 *Church at Domburg with Tree*, 1909, oil on cardboard, 36 x 36 cm, Gemeentemuseum; A684 *Lighthouse at Westkapelle in Pink*, 1909, oil on cardboard, 39 x 29,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

[645] A673 *Apple Tree, Pointillist Version*, 1908-09, oil on composition board, 56,8 x 75 cm, Dallas Museum of Fine Arts.

from the ground. Having loaded his brush with black paint and worked his way upwards, he proceeded precisely in the way the tree grew. He worked his way first out into the major branches, then to the younger ones sprouting from them, recreating the currents of the tree's development.

He has gnarled one branch so that it contorts itself into a loop and then plunges downwards. The struggles and defeat of that limb are so vivid that one wonders if the artist saw it as a metaphor representing his father after breaking away from his fellow members of the Reformed Church of the Netherlands. The way the branch bows down, beaten into resignation, is human. Having tried to reach high, that branch as portrayed by Mondrian has been crushed by overextending itself into territory where it could not survive.

Other branches declare their triumph. These limbs, starting lower down, leave the trunk light of foot, and leap in a happy dance.

In true Cubist fashion, Mondrian has presented his subject from two different vantage points. Once he established this tree which is like a three-act play, Mondrian, having started face-on, has then imagined himself under its bare branches. Looking upwards, he visualizes the canopy the tree will acquire when spring comes, once it is in full leaf. He painted that shape so that it resembles a large bracket form which points upwards, while encompassing most of the outline of the bare-branched tree. Then he added a lot of bright circles of color, with substantial gaps between them, on top of the bracket shape. Those rings of vivid hue resemble the lighting fixtures in one of Seurat's large paintings of a circus and of a dance hall.[646] Perhaps they are meant to represent the apples that will grow here, come the early autumn. I read them as such, and while I am not sure that Mondrian conceived of these circles to represent pieces of fruit, in their luscious red, against an exquisite ice blue which works elegantly with the black of the tree, they make, to my eyes, a superb symbol of nourishment in general. In the vitality of the forms and colors, the painting can be read as a parable to the way the fruit of the earth will strengthen all of humankind. The blue dashes invoke the spirit of God; the way the tree, doing its chaotic dance, resembles a multi-limbed Indian deity.

Those meanings are not conjured because Mondrian intended them precisely. But because he evokes a universal energy, he kindles them.

To make *Apple Tree, Pointillist Version*, Mondrian had the courage to juxtapose the matt brown of cardboard with the sheen of vibrant oil paints, including a bright white at the edges of the saturated ocean blue. The contrasts create fusion.

The artist's oneness with color and line, and the state of enchantment in which he improvised a buoyant art unlike anyone else's, resembles the trumpet flourishes that would be spontaneously invented decades later by

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[646] Georges Seurat, *Le cirque*, 1890-91, Musée d'Orsay; *Le Chahut*, 1889-90, Kröller-Müller Museum.

his hero Louis Amstrong. Mondrian always controlled himself with the discipline of a consummate artist, but he also let himself go. Allowing himself freedom within structure, nothing stood in his way, and the results are divine.

XVII

At the same time that he had started to focus on single trees, on their own rather than as part of the forest, Mondrian again began to draw and paint individual flowers.[647] Later in life, he would isolate rectangles of blue, yellow, or red, framing them in black and surrounding them in white, so that each could exert its independent force. These solo performances—of a tree or flower, or of a block of solid color—provide points of focus that steady the viewer, inducing calm by eliminating the overload of everyday life. Concentrating the subject, they concentrate us. We become more integrated, our disparate elements conjoined in a single entity, than was the case before we saw these art works.

This presentation of the subject uninterrupted and independent, with everything extraneous stripped away, became essential to Mondrian. To be solitary, to exist primarily alone, was increasingly the natural state of his personal existence as well.

Theoretically, he still intended to have a wife and children, however. Mondrian probably did not yet realize the extent to which isolation was requisite for his survival.

#

Having avoided painting flowers since 1902, as if his having previously making them his subject matter because they were lucrative had put an onus on them, when he again took up flowers in 1908, Mondrian infused each single blossom with symbolic meaning, consistent with their role in Theosophical doctrine. In the Dutch language, all flowers species, and the word "flower" itself, have the feminine gender, in keeping with the Christian association of flowers with the Virgin Mary and the other female saints, and Theosophy honored that idea while adding its own message. Mondrian also gave each blossom her own personality. He anthropomorphized them. Some stand upright like proud coloratura. Others, wilted and dying, lean forward like Toulouse-Lautrec's tragic chanteuses.

Mondrian began this series of single flowers shortly after moving into a studio apartment on the second floor of Sarphatipark 42. The building had been constructed especially for artists, but its traditional style and brick construction were at odds with the taste of those of its inhabitants who embraced modernism and sought progress in the visual world. This bow to old-fashioned ways was at the corner of the Van der Helststraat, near

[647] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 396.

Mondrian's old residence on Albert Cuypstraat, in the neighborhood, called "de Pijp," which was populated mostly by artists and low-life. Prostitutes roamed the streets going to and from the numerous brothels.[648] Mondrian's trees and flowers embodied with artistry and panache the cast of characters he observed every day. The flowers evoked the women who depended on their alluring appearance and who sold their sexuality; the trees encapsulate men as physically forceful beings proudly exercising their own sexual power.

Mondrian covered the walls of his new home and workplace with these paintings of flowers and trees that evoked the two sexes. The paintings made a verdant sanctuary of this place where he surrounded himself with his collections of copper and a mélange of antique tables and side chairs in his workspace, and slept in a small alcove just big enough for his bed.[649] The first flower paintings he made and hung there was a small oil of a single magnolia.[650] It presents the blossom at its maximum fullness, with its six large, silky soft, white petals miraculous in their combined thinness and strength. These petals are open completely, the small black stamen at the middle revealed like a prize. It did not stay on the wall for long. Shortly after finishing it, Mondrian gave this painting to Greta Heijbroek.[651] He had once given a flower painting to Eva de Beneditty, as a sort of consolation price when he ended their relationship. The present to Heijbroek was a different sort of gesture; he planned to ask her to marry him.

#

Following the magnolia, Mondrian painted—in oil, watercolor, gouache, charcoal, or a combination of those media, on cardboard or on paper but never on canvas—dramatic portraits of sunflowers and chrysanthemums. Most of the single long-stemmed flowers are dying. They are heavy headed; their wilted blossoms hang limply from their weakened stems; their leaves are about to drop off. Only a few of them are at an earlier stage of life, in full flower or having just reached the turning point. None are buds.

Has there ever been another flower painter so preoccupied with the end of life?

Flowers have been a favorite subject for artists since early times, on Greek vases and Roman mosaics, in the masterful Dutch and Spanish still-lifes of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in the Impressionists' fields of poppies. But has anyone else portrayed blossoms in this brooding mood, in a final decline and anticipating their imminent end? It is an established idiom that flowers represented females—not only in Theosophy and Christianity, but also in the Art Nouveau design that was still prevalent

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[648] An Huizinga, 'De Pijp als rosse buurt, middernachtzending, cabaret, kamertjes en kasten – en Pst-pst', in: *Ons Amsterdam* 36(1984)1, p. 14-19.
[649] Photograph of Mondrian in his studio at Sarphatipark 42 (c.1908). Fotographer Reinier Drektraan.
[650] A594 *Magnolia*, 1908, private collection.
[651] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 396.

in the Netherlands. It is not a reach to see the sunflowers in particular, their petals like bonnets, as embodying Johanna Mondrian. At age thirty-six, Mondrian was coping as never before with mortality.

Fig. 28. Mondrian, *Dying Sunflower I*, 1908; *Dying Sunflower II*, 1908

Three days after Johanna Mondrian died, one critic who was reviewing the Stedelijk show for the largest newspaper in Rotterdam, wrote that Mondrian's 'sinister female torsos' reflected 'the nature of the artist'. The writer added that 'A similar sentiment seems to have given birth to his sunflowers, which gloomily behold us with their cyclops eyes.'[652] (Fig. 28) How right that the blossoms resemble single large eyes and behold us. 'Sinister' and 'gloomy' are off base, however. The dying flowers are still regal, possessed of impressive height and terrific force in spite of the end that awaits them. Even if they are now hunched forward with dowager's hump, weighed down by their desiccation, they were clearly once lovely. Taking their final bows in the spotlight, resembling divas in long black gowns, they have a gaze that, rather than being monstrous, begs for help. As they anticipate their own passage from earthly existence, these flowers as people ask the essential question of why life must end.

In Theosophy, flowers were revered for providing oxygen and serving as a food source; beyond that, 'Plant intelligence also reflects a soul-life and

[652] H.L. Berkenhoff, in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* January 11, 1909, quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 397.

consciousness' which warrants careful observation.[653] That deification of flowers was not unique to one spiritual movement or to one modern artist. It was equally fundamental to the teaching of Paul Klee at the Bauhaus. Klee made no reference to Madame Blavatsky or her theories, but saw natural growth as the essence of all of life. In Weimar, he walked every day through the English Garden to get from his home to the school, and in his teaching and art, the growth of flowers assumed sacred proportion, equally so after he traveled to Egypt once the Bauhaus was in Dessau and returned to paint the particular miraculous blossoms that emerge from desert sand.[654] Mondrian imbued his flowers with qualities specific to Theosophy, but they pertain equally to all flowers observed by anyone who is alert to the infinite magnitude of natural growth, whether the artist is a Japanese calligrapher or a "naïve" like the Douanier Rousseau.

The doctrine codified by Madame Blavatsky recognizes, that, in plants, 'Desire and Will' are fundamental to 'primal intelligence.'[655] Flowers are revered for the way their structure 'shows an elegant geometry indicative of mind and ingenuity.'[656] The sunflower, with its perpetual rotation in the direction of the sun, epitomizes this evolution and refinement of plants. 'Their design reveals a transcendent intelligence. Really to know a plant one would have to look into its soul-life, because there are deep mysteries underlying the most ordinary activities. The germination of a seed is a marvel, for it knows how to send its roots down into the earth and its shoots up toward the light.'[657]

Mondrian presents his sunflowers and chrysanthemums as a source of the harmony that was, for him, the main draw of Theosophy. With their 'inner consciousness,' their 'secret life,' their 'will and cosmic urge,' they exemplify well-being in concert with all that is alive. Theosophical doctrine emphasizes that 'There is a life force, a cosmic energy surrounding living things, shared by all kingdoms including the human […] Nature is a great brotherhood of beings, a symbiosis on many levels, most of it beyond our detection and ordinary understanding.'[658] Drawing and painting flowers, Mondrian was trying to evoke the communion of all living creatures.

We will never know what Mondrian saw of his mother as she neared her death, but I am convinced that in his poignant portraits of chysanthemiums, once having had such life in their copious petals, on their last legs, Mondrian was envisioning his dying mother.

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[653] John Van Mater, Jr, 'Our Intelligent Companions, the Plants', in: *Sunrise Magazine*, April/May 1987, Theosophical University Press, [n.p.] (http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/brother/br-jvmj2.htm).
[654] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 97;191.
[655] Van Mater, *Intelligent Companions*, [n.p.].
[656] Van Mater, *Intelligent Companions*, [n.p.].
[657] Van Mater, *Intelligent Companions*, [n.p.].
[658] Van Mater, *Intelligent Companions*, [n.p.].

Mondrian recognized that, like the person who had given him life, creatures as beautiful and innocent as flowers—whose earlier stages included fertilization, birth, and multiple phases of growth—are subject to weakness, illness, and, ultimately, to death. Immersing himself in the life cycle of some of nature's most alluring plants, he was trying to come to grips with that painful truth. His goal was to go beyond the harsh inevitability of mortality and find his way to what is universal and timeless.

XVIII

I wish I could present you, with total certainty, the facts of Mondrian's sexuality and his love life, and their connection or lack thereof. I consider them crucial, because I think there is a direct connection between his sexual drive and his personal needs and his art. The unique way he consecrated his life to painting, and his work from the earliest drawings of woods to the pure abstraction, are interwoven with his longings, his fears, and his resolution about them. This is undubitable. But the true nature of his eroticism and longings is difficult to discern. I have my own theories about Mondrian's emotional and sexual nature and its impact on his art, but, as I once heard my grandmother say to my mother—I was about twelve years old, so it made a big impression—'you weren't under the bed, so how can you be certain?'

I try to present you other credible views as well as my own. Come to your own conclusions.

There is a reputable school of Mondrian research which maintains that women and life-threatening illness, symbolized by the dying flowers which he painted with such frequency, dominated Mondrian's mind because, in the summer of 1908, the thirty-six-year-old artist was infected with syphilis, or afraid he might be. A second part of the theory is that, as a result, starting when he was thirty-seven, he never again, for the rest of his life, had sex with anybody.

The De Vink, the café Mondrian and his friends frequented when they painted on the River Gein had back rooms. It is said that on one evening there, a number of men, most of them painter-friends of Mondrian's, contracted syphilis, all from the same woman, 'a prostitute or a model.'

Here the story was initially published in 1994. It was spearheaded by the Dutch art historian Marty Bax, and co-authored by Simone Niemeyer and Harmen Snel, a genealogist and archivist. It is completely hypothetical. 'Mondrian also would have been frightened to be infected.'[659] The main source of this information was Conrad Kickert, a painter, former art critic and collector who, a few years later, would, for a brief period of time, become one of Mondrian's closest friends, instrumental to his moving to

[659] Bax, *De passies*, p. 35.

Paris in 1911. Kickert would eventually maintain that between 1906 and 1909 Mondrian 'visited several times prostitutes. He was infected with syphilis three times, after which he according to tradition abstained fully from sexual intercourse.'[660] Kickert, who had syphilis himself, knew a lot about the subject. Bax and her co-authors provide a footnote in their published text saying that Robert Welsh, 'who got this information from Conrad Kickert,' told them all of this in 'verbal communication to the writers.'[661]

#

In 2011, I met with Marty Bax in Amsterdam.[662] By then she had been committed to Mondrian scholarship for at least two decades, as she still is. Bax has published an article pertaining to the impact of syphilis on Mondrian.[663]

This Dutch specialist in modern art, and in particular its occult connections could not have been more agreeable in arranging for me to interview her; she relishes opportunities to present her views. Bax told me she is certain Mondrian had the venereal disease and that it affected a lot about how he lived; she also sees syphilis in the subject matter of his art. The lynchpin of her argument was a point she reiterated from her and her colleagues' 1994 article, which was that Conrad Kickert informed Robert Welsh that Mondrian had the illness. Bax said she had gone through the archives of Amsterdam hospitals, and, while she found no documentation to substantiate the claim, she was sure the only reason there was no record of Mondrian having consulted doctors about his syphilis is that he paid for its treatment with art works rather than with cash. Cash would have generated a receipt, but nothing would have been written down to acknowledge payment with a painting. Bax told me that she knew that Mondrian had syphilis because she had discovered that the doctor who treated syphilis in his neighborhood owned a couple of paintings by the artist; since no bills of sale for these canvases could be found, it was clear to her that they had been traded for services.

Bax then allowed that this same doctor treated Mondrian for a skin condition, and that the paintings for which there were no bills of sale might have been in payment of those medical sessions instead. Yet this did not invalidate the "fact" that he was treated for venereal disease.

When I asked Marty Bax how she knew that Mondrian went to prostitutes, she told me, 'Everyone did back then.' On the other hand, when I said that I had read or heard theories on Mondrian's sexuality ranging from the image of him as a Casanova to his being homosexual (mostly repressed,

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[660] Bax, *De passies*, p. 35.
[661] Bax, *De passies*, p. 40, note 12.
[662] Meeting of the author with Dr. Marty Bax in Amsterdam, July 6, 2011.
[663] Marty Bax (a.o.), 'De passies van Piet Mondriaan', in: *Jong Holland. Tijdschrift voor kunst en vormgeving na 1850*, 10(1994)2, p. 32-41.

but occasionally active) to his being a virgin lifelong, the person who had just told me that Mondrian had venereal disease and went to whore houses agreed that his having a total lack of sexual experience was not impossible, and that the nature of his desires were a mystery.

She then quoted a Russian woman, a prostitute, who was having an affair with the poet Adriaan Roland Holst and visited Mondrian in 1917. After an afternoon in the artist's Amsterdam studio, the woman said, in French, 'Mais je pense que ce n'est pas possible de faire l'amour ici.' This woman felt that if she would not have been able to have sex in the place where Mondrian lived, no one could. Bax considered this evidence of Mondrian's asexuality, which she suggested was a by-product of his having had syphilis. I would later learn that, while the Russian woman's remark was almost correct as quoted, the visit occurred about a decade later, in Paris, and that the woman was not Roland Holst's lover, nor a prostitute, but simply a beautiful looking person with a penchant for abstract art, whose visit Roland Holst felt would be enjoyable for Mondrian.[664]

When I heard this story, I was not yet deep enough into my research to know that Mondrian did not have a studio in Amsterdam in 1917. He was working in Laren that year. Nor did I realize that the year and country Bax ascribed to the remark were completely off, even if the quotation was accurate. On the other hand, even though I was hypocritically polite to Bax—we biographers learn to mask our reactions—in my thinking I

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[664] 'Op Montparnasse ontmoette Roland Holst een mooie, jonge Russin die grote belangstelling bleek te hebben voor eigentijdse beeldende kunst. Hij vertelde haar over de denkbeelden van de toen nog volstrekt onbekende Mondriaan en ze bleek zeer geïnteresseerd. 'Ik kan u wel met hem in aanraking brengen,' zei Roland Holst. 'Graag.'Hij had een bijbedoeling. Denkend aan de eenzame schilder in zijn abstracte kamer, koesterde hij de hoop dat deze mooie vrouw, met haar levendige belangstelling voor moderne kunst, misschien de ware voor hem zou kunnen zijn. Toen ze samen bij Mondriaan op bezoek gingen, bemerkte hij, tot zijn voldoening, dat er dadelijk contact was. En wederzijds. De vrouw vroeg het honderd uit en Mondriaan ontvouwde, met welbehagen, zijn theorieën. Het ontging Roland Holst allerminst dat de schilder niet alleen voor de intelligentie maar ook voor de schoonheid van zijn bezoekster zeer gevoelig was. Eindelijk stond ze op om heen te gaan. Mondriaan bracht haar naar de deur. En daar sprak ze, met een gebaar naar die abstracte kamer, déze fatale woorden: "C'est très intéressant mais c'est complètement impossible de faire l'amour ici."', Simon Carmiggelt, *Mooi kado*, CPNB, p. 77-78 (http://www.dbnl.org/tekst/carm002mooi02_01/carm002mooi02_01_0018.php). Maaike van Domselaer-Middelkoop mentions a similar story in her recollections: 'Hij was die avond in een vlotte bui en deed allerlei verhalen over zijn belevenissen met vrouwen; o.a. vertelde hij van een Russin, die bij hem was gekomen en na een paar minuten in zijn atelier te hebben rondgekeken heel verwonderd gezegd had: "mais… on ne peut pas faire l'amour ici".' Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 289.

instantly dismissed the idea that Mondrian's living space was antithetical to sex and meant that he never went to bed with anyone.

#

The conversation with Marty Bax then assumed a completely different direction. Bax told me that her daughter had an extreme case of "hyper-sensitivity." This is a new diagnostic term for a disorder which has, for example, the effect of someone's being unable to tolerate the feeling of even the softest small label inside her clothing, Bax described this aversion in her own child, and said that she was sure that Mondrian had the same disorder: hence his extreme sensitivity to noise, to spiders, or to anything out of place in his visual surroundings.

It seems to me that Marty Bax, with the best of intentions, has, in her eagerness to provide a real understanding of Mondrian's personality, blurred the differences between her own everyday reality and the nature of the elusive artist about whom we are both so curious. Nonetheless, her theories have entered the cannon of Mondrian scholarship. This is largely because of what Bax and her two colleagues wrote about the painting *Passion Flower* (Fig. 29).[665]

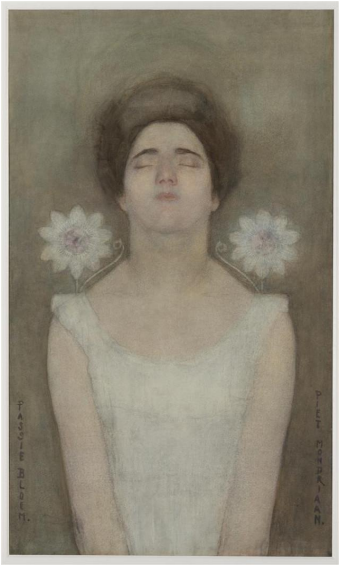

Fig. 29. Mondrian, *Passion Flower*, c. 1901

[665] A145 *Passie Bloem,* c.1901 (later?). Welsh himself states in the CR that 'No other work of art produced by Mondrian in a naturalistic style has been assigned dates of execution so divergent as has *Passion Flower*. […] it was most likely produced either circa 1900-01 […] or else circa 1908', Welsh, *CR I*, p. 213-214.

Their analysis of this portrait of a young woman, among the most important of all of Mondrian's figurative work, to which various dates are ascribed but which belongs to these years in Amsterdam when Theosophy had so deeply impacted Mondrian, has had great influence. Their views on the portrait have often been cited, and have affected views on this key picture even when they are not directly referenced.

Bax report that in 1908 Mondrian was struck by the sight of a woman across from him in a train car because of the green coloring of her skin. Mondrian was sure she had syphilis. Bax deduces that 'If Mondrian connected this color with the symptoms of syphilis', he might have asked some information from 'a physician at the office of the municipal health services' in De Pijp.[666] Given all the brothels in the neighborhood, the local doctors would have been specialists.

It is a romantic notion. One easily sees the appeal of the story of a middle-aged artist, fascinated by sex and interested in color, researching why syphilis would give skin a green tint. If it is true, *Sunflower I*, in which the green is indeed the hue of illness, could be seen as an allegorical portrait of severely afflicted whore. But, Bax and her colleagues, tell us, it is in *Passion Flower*, the discomfiting portrait Mondrian did of that woman opposite him on the train, that Mondrian's preoccupation with venereal disease was at its apogee.

Marty Bax, and her followers, maintains that, with a clear understanding of this painting Mondrian is said to have made in 1908, one can really understand its maker at that juncture in his life. A biographer need only look at the evidence: it is all there, and Mondrian is an open book.

XIX

This painting that has inspired profuse analysis and multiple interpretations from directions, treated by people interested in Mondrian like a vital clue to a great mysery, is simply a medium sized watercolor. Mondrian himself probably did not attach the same importance to *Passion Flower* as to his larger canvases of the same time period. But this painting of an exotically coiffed woman with thickly drawn eyebrows is provocative. The subject wears a low-cut filmy white dress that could be anything from a uniform for members of a religious order to a night-gown to a streetwalker's provocative sheath. And with her piles of hair, she faces upwards with her eyes shut as if she is in a trance.

Whether her mood is a state of despair or a happy reverie is as uncertain as the precise nature of her dress. Her pose also offers multiple readings. The painting stops at the woman's waist. The position of her arms, of which the skin tone is pale as a ghost's suggests that she has her hands clasped;

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[666] Bax, *Passies*, p. 36.

they could be over her genitals, but they could be slightly higher or lower. She could be holding them exactly as Eve does in many paintings of her fleeing the Garden of Eden. The woman whose portrait id called 'Passion Flower' could simply be being modest. Or maybe she has interlocked her hands in penetant prayer. Or maybe she is masturbating.

Is this a painting of a prostitute with syphilis or of a religious acolyte in a moment of piety? Is her garment meant for a spiritual rite, its white a mark of purity, or is she a hooker all gussied up? The Mondrian scholar Hans Janssen describes the woman as 'deep in ecstatic meditation,' and the painting as a 'metaphorical representation' in which 'the passion flower embodies the instruments of Christ's passion.'[667] He observes that 'Mondrian shows himself not insensitive to the occult.'[668] The large flowers positioned over each of the woman's shoulders can be seen as either Christian or Theosophical symbols; they give the woman and those representations of purity a parallelity. She is like a flower; at the same time, those flowers become persona. Read in that way, the watercolor causes boundaries between the botanical and biological realms to disappear. Moreover, the form and brightness of these particular flowers cause them to resemble stars, which augments the impression that they, and the woman, are weightless. Rather than being physically solid and of my earth, they are transcendent. Janssen's reference to 'Christ's passion' pertains. But while this is the idea the scholar preferred in his 2002 Mondrian book *The Path to Abstraction*, in his 2008 *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum Den Haag*, Hans Janssen states that 'Mondrian would later say about this drawing that it was the symbolistic representation of a woman playing the piano in ecstasy.'[669] Janssen does not tell us when and where Mondrian said that, but piano music is a more secular source of ecstacy.

#

Mondrian has unquestionably intended to make a meaningful statement with this watercolor. *Passion Flower* has a dead earnestness to it. Whether it pertains to Christian dogma or Theosophical beliefs, or illustrates a streetwalker's tragedy, is, however, open to debate. Nothing is conclusive; finally, this watercolor is befuddling. The symbolism is unclear; so is the ambient mood. The picture gives its viewer the uncomfortable feeling that occurs when one faces someone absorbed by his or her own mysterious emotional state, flaunting an air of being overcome while keeping its origin secret.

Mondrian was floundering. Usually his art celebrated the splendor of nature, and exemplified certainty and the skill to communicate it. Once he became an abstract artist, he would always go the extra step in the interest of resolution. *Passion Flower* was the antithesis.

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[667] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 79.
[668] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 84.
[669] Janssen, *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum*, p. 126.

Yet to understand him when he was confident and knew his way, we need to comprehend what was going on inside him when he was ill-at-ease.

#

The dating of this troublesome painting has been debated by Mondrian scholars for decades. In 1965, Robert Welsh said *Passion Flower* was done in 1906-08, but by 1971, he changed it to 'c.1901 (1902-03).' He made the date earlier because, in the interim, Albert van den Briel had insisted to the Canadian scholar that he owned the painting by the time he registered in the National School of Forestry in Wageningen in 1905. Michel Seuphor, based on what Van den Briel told *him,* dated *Passion Flower* 'c.1903-04'. On the other hand, Cor Blok, in his 1974'*Piet Mondriaan. Een catalogus van zijn werk in Nederlands openbaar bezit,*' states that in 1962 Van den Briel wrote him that he was sure the painting was made before 1911, but not necessarily any earlier than that.[670]

Marty Bax believes that while the woman in *Passion Flower* does resemble some of the young ladies Mondrian painted and drew between 1898 and 1900, and while he had occasionally painted flowers and floral motifs by then, the flatter surfaces of paint, the symbolic importance of the flowers, the woman's green tinge, and the tragic aspect of this portrait, place it in the period around 1908 when Mondrian was preoccupied with syphilis.[671]

Bax claims that the woman resembles Marie Simon, a friend he met in 1908 in the Theosophical Society.[672] She also maintains that the summer of 1908 was when some men who frequented the back rooms of De Vink contracted syphilis, and that Mondrian was afraid he also had developed the illness, but she makes no link between Marie Simon and the prostitutes.

If we read the six point type in which Robert Welsh reported his conversations with Albert van den Briel, we get to what may be a key point. Van den Briel communicated frequently with the person Welsh, in his sweetly old-fashioned way, calls 'the present writer.'[673] And, as Welsh gingerly puts it, *Passion Flower* was, according to Van den Briel, 'a conceptualized examination of a generalized type of woman whose deepest personal passions might have the tragic outcome, among other social misfortunes, of venereal disease. Van den Briel remembered in this context that Mondrian actually sought a doctor's advice on the outward symptoms of such diseases and thereupon, correctly or not, added a slightly pallor to the neck of his figure.'[674]

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[670] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 213-214.
[671] Bax, *Passies*, p. 32-41.
[672] Also in her dissertation from 2006, Bax sticks to the point of identification with Marie Simon. She does not agree with Welsh' stylistic arguments in his *CR I*, see: Bax, *Web der schepping*, p. 319.
[673] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 214.
[674] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 214.

Is this where Marty Bax got her idea that the subject of the painting had syphilis? Did she then go the extra step and decide that Mondrian had it as well, which is why he consulted those doctors (even if Van den Briel gave, as the reason for the consultation, Mondrian's wish to depict syphilitic skin accurately, not his fear of having the malady.)? I know that people claim that Kickert said Mondrian was afraid he had syphilis from a prostitute, but I cannot determine if it was true that Kickert said it, and, even if it was, Kickert was famously a troublemaker.

#

It was the day after I met Marty Bax that I looked at *Passion Flower* with Hans Janssen, whose writing on the painting I had already read.[675] The ambiguous portrait is in the collection of the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, where Janssen had by then been curator of modern art there for some twenty years. Janssen and I, studying *Passion Flower* together in the Gemeentemuseum storage, agreed that it is one of Mondrian's weakest pictures. He told me that the way the lettering descends down the left-hand side suggests that it was intended as a poster more than a pure art work, which possibly explains its lackluster quality. He also held to the 1901 date, confirmed by the research of any number of authorities, and treated the syphilis theory as poppycock.[676]

He poo-poohed the idea that she is covering her crotch and demonstrated with his arms the way that the subject's pose indicates that her hands are clasped in prayer, not as a shame-ridden shielding of her sexual organs. He was absolute: the watercolor is about prayer and religion—meaning, above all, Theosophy—and has nothing to do with venereal disease.

#

Hans Janssen is a persuasive speaker. This is in part because he is so energetic and affable; he is also well-informed and immensely intelligent. Here I was in no way faking my reactions when I agreed with him completely.

Afterwards, though, I wondered if it is possible that *Passion Flower* is, as Hans Janssen maintains, a religious parable, yet, concomitantly, is, as Welsh informs us Van den Briel told him, a commentary on sexual mores and the consequences, for both men and women, of prostitution, if not specifically on Mondrian's own health situation.

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[675] Meeting of the author with Hans Janssen, curator at the Gemeentemuseum The Hague, July 7 2011.

[676] In his 2008 *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum Den Haag* book, Janssen states ca. 1901-1908, see Janssen, *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum*, p. 126. In his 2016 biography, Janssen writes that it is unclear whether the work is entirely from 1901 or that Mondrian made important changes in later years, see Janssen, *Piet Mondriaan*, p. 305.

It has been posited that the flowers are shorthand for the crown of thorns, making the painting a reference to the Passion of Christ.[677] Christ suffered for the sins of humankind: how often had that point been drummed into Mondrian in his childhood! If Mondrian frequented prostitutes but feared deeply for his own health—and, as a man interested in the hardships of the workforce, was concerned about the well-being of women who sold their bodies—he might have represented evidence of the dangers of carnal lust in the same painting that is a prayer for absolution. Maybe the reason he painted without his usual proficiency is that his absorption in these themes made him ill-at-ease; his emotional unbalance got in the way of his artistry.

Fig. 30. Mondrian, *Nude Study for Evolution*, 1911

Albert van den Briel said that the woman who posed for *Passion Flower* was Simon Maris's model, Nootje.[678] (Maris married her in September of 1908, by which time she was pregnant with their child.) Mondrian regularly made women in his circle recognizable in his art; he would draw his fiancée Greta Heijbroek in the nude (Fig. 30).[679] But Bax disputes that Nootje sat

[677] Sam Segal, *Een bloemrijk verleden. Overzicht van de Noord- en Zuidnederlandse bloemschilderkunst, 1600-heden*, Kunsthandel P. De Boer, Amsterdam 1982, p. 223. Cf. Welsh, *CR I*, p. 214.
[678] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 214.
[679] A646 *Nude Study for Evolution*, 1911, crayon and charcoal on paper, 86 x 42 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

for *Passion Flower* and makes the case that the woman who modeled for it was indeed Marie Simon, fifteen years younger than Mondrian and secretary of the Theosophical Society.[680] Photos show Simon to have worn her hair in the same way, to have a similarly shaped head, and much the same mouth and eyes as the woman in the painting. Marie Simon is rumored to have been another of Mondrian's love interests.

Regardless of who actually posed, did Mondrian intend to represent a prostitute, cringing at her syphilis and lamenting her life that gave her the illness? In that context, Marty Bax told me she sees in the woman the seven chakras that make energy centers within the body, and the seven astral areas that form the ethereal human body just as the chakras compose the physical one. White, the symbol of purity, is the preferred color for the garment in which one meditates. Green is the color of the fourth chakra; where it becomes yellowish, it suggests 'the lower third principle when one meditates on the lower desires.'[681] Here Bax has, I later discovered, made an error, the fourth chakra, whatever its color, represents the heart, and could never suggest desires stemming from the genital regions.[682]

The text co-authored by Marty Bax also declares that the number five is associated with the middle chakra, which is the reason that one of the irises has five stamens—emblematic of the male sexual organ—with the single pestle emblematic of the woman. The problem with that theory, though, is that the number paired with the middle chakra is traditionally four, not five.[683]

On the other hand, could the five stamens around the single pestle represent the five men who contracted syphilis from the same woman that night at De Vink?

Bax also points out that the lower part of the woman's body, where the three lower chakras reside, is not shown. These parts do not get reincarnated after death.[684] Is she therefore suggesting that this is a painting of someone reincarnated? Has death occurred? Was his ill mother on his mind? Was the prospect of death by syphilis on his mind?

#

Madame Blavatsky deemed a celibate existence imperative to the receipt of occult knowledge. We do know that Mondrian stopped going to De Vink as he became increasingly allied with Theosophy. If *Passion Flower* was painted in 1908, and if Mondrian indeed had syphilis, and if he focused on venereal disease as his artistic subject, it was the most autobiographical painting he ever made. It was, in that case, the revelation of what he perceived as the

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[680] Bax, *Passies*, p. 37
[681] Bax, *Passies*, p. 39.
[682] See for example C.W. Leadbeater, *The chakras: a monograph*, Theosophical Publishing House, Adyar, Madras 1927.
[683] Bax, *Passies*, p. 39.
[684] Bax, *Passies*, p. 39.

dangers of sexuality and his choice of abstinence and spiritual transformation through religion.

If all of the "if"s were true, and this is a portrait of a syphilitic whore, felled by the illness Mondrian feared in himself, *Passion Flower* announces his rejection of complication in life and the arrival of spiritual light (in the symbols around her.) Was Mondrian revealing himself plagued by a sinner's guilt and concern over the wages of vice, true to his neo-Calvinist upbringing, and extolling the otherworldliness and the transcendent state achievable through Theosophy? All of this would, in that case, be a stepping stone to abstraction.

We know that Mondrian had already, on one occasion, escaped and taken flight—to Brabant for a year. And while we know less about it, the time near Oele was another period of self-imposed isolation. In both attempts to live in the countryside, Mondrian was intentionally distancing himself from human complications. In Brabant, he went from sleeplessness to calm; this was because he had gotten away from emotional complexity that unhinged him. Does *Passion Flower* illustrate another form of renouncement? Does it add the element of shame to the idea of vice? If so, should we see those painful feelings as the catalyst to what would soon follow for Mondrian: a life devoted to ideas of universal perfection, when everyday existence consisted of extending a line by two inches on one day and reducing it the next, relocating a plane of color and then, a week later, fine-tuning its position? Was Mondrian in Paris like one of those characters in Tolstoy who ends up in a convent to cleanse herself of a previous life of sin, who focuses on goodness and godliness because the "self" has become intolerably frightening?

Tertiary syphilis might well have affected Mondrian's subsequent decisions in life. Its symptoms could have had a direct impact on his art.

#

A letter in the archives of Marty Bax provided new information. It is a letter Robert Welsh wrote Bax on June 7, 1994. Welsh's letter, on University of Toronto stationery, addresses a range of subjects. In his even-tempered tone, and the gracefulness and generosity with which he discusses each topic, Welsh has a calmness, and demonstrates a work ethos, remarkably like Mondrian's own. Welsh first makes a case to Bax about the excellence of the artist Breitner, declaring his work far better than its reputation; it is a courageous viewpoint, and one that casts a major Mondrian supporter in favorable light. Welsh also goes into detail about writing fees due both him and Bax, with the truly Mondrianesque statement, 'While I believe that no authors should be singled out for preferential treatment, I trust that it was also understood that none of us should be treated less generously than another. […] of course what fees I do receive will be plowed back into further travel and research costs in connection with the PM catalogue raisonné.' In his letter, Welsh also allows, concerning the dating of *Passion Flower*, that 'Van den Briel's accounts cannot be taken as ironclad proof

regarding date of execution.' But, Welsh continues to Bax, 'I grilled him repeatedly and pretty hard over the years, and his story about 'Nootje' and the meaning of the piece remained rather consistent.'[685] This, of course, was the origin of the idea that *Passion Flower* portrays a woman suffering from syphilis, and that Mondrian spoke with a doctor about how the illness affected skin color. Van den Briel, to the best of our knowledge, never said that Mondrian himself had venereal disease, however.

Regardless, Welsh says that unless Bax could prove that Nootje became Simon Maris's companion only after, say, 1904, he would still favor a date for the work closer to 1900. He gives a number of examples of work datable to that earlier time period with a strong stylist resemblance to *Passion Flower*.

From there, Robert Welsh takes off. He insists to Marty Bax that Conrad Kickert's statements to him are not 'of much importance.' He chastises Bax for having mentioned in her article on *Passion Flower* the casual remark of Kickert's that Mondrian was afraid he had syphilis. The Canadian scholar writes, 'The use of my verbal quotation from Kikkert is […] irrelavant [sic], even misleading, since 1) when I interviewed him in the late 1960s he was clearly envious of PM's international reputation, 2) his reference to PM and syphilis had no chronological identification, most likely including at least one Paris incident, if true (frankly, I doubt the whole story, since I consider CK a congenital liar and much less trustworthy a source than Van de Briel) and 3) the story was volunteered by CK upon my merely asking whether one or both of an unhappy love affair (I then suspected but did not have the facts about Greta Heijbroek) or the attraction of Cubism had motivated PM's first visit to Paris. In no case did CK ever indicate that he was an intermediary for PM's visits to prostitutes either in the Netherlands or Paris, and I certainly consider this question irrelevant to the issue of PM's sexuality. While I naturally consider this a legitimate issue to raise in reference to his art, my main reason to mention it within the context of the Mondriaan and the Amstel discussions was to indicate that the catalogue should not be demeened. I fully appreciate that PM's sexuality will be discussed in the future by self-appointed "authorities," […] but this does not mean that I appreciate that casual comments provided by me in closed quarters should be published without so much as my written approval.'[686]

Robert Welsh then goes on to make clear that in the catalogue raisonné he will not go into any of this. By telling Bax that he has no intention of arguing with her analysis of *Passion Flower*—syphilis, prostitutes, the later date—he in effect discredits it: 'Let me assure you Marty, that I am not commenting upon your article, with the intention of confronting it in the catalogue raisonné. There I intend only to summarize the existing evidence, although my dating will remain "c. 1900 or later?".'[687]

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[685] Letter Robert Welsh to Marty Bax, June 7 1994, Bax Art Archive.
[686] Letter Welsh to Bax, June 7 1994, Bax Art Archive.
[687] Letter Welsh to Bax, June 7 1994, Bax Art Archive.

Welsh is adamant: 'It is my feeling that the Passiebloem remains essentially a Symbolist work of art like a few c. 1900 paintings and drawings rather than a work of the 1908-11 transitional period. […] In this context, I was a bit miffed at the fact that you did not consider the possibility that already circa 1900 PM could have invested the Passiebloem with some degree of Theosophic symbolism, especially considering the new discovery of a drawing of a Lotus flower from about that year.'[688]

The author of the catalogue raisonné holds out completely for the religious meaning of the painting. He cites 'the Christian crucifixion associations with which the flower spiecies [sic] had been identified since the 16th century […] Such Christian associations were still paramount among Dutch […] and other late nineteenth century European Symbolist artists, and doubtless PM too would have been aware of such Christian iconographic traditions. In my PhD dissertation I even quote two lines of poetry from the sonnet "Passie Bloem": by Hélène Swarth ("Should a passion flower blossom in her heart, Then is a woman hammered upon a cross of martyrdom.").'[689]

He also dispels Bax's theory about the chakras, pointing out that neither Blavatsky nor Steiner referred to these, and the main book on the Chakras only came out in 1927.

Welsh signs off elegantly: 'Without the discovery of some fresh documentation, I'm afraid any such interpretations remain truly speculative.'[690]

Marty Bax told me none of this. She has had the professionalism, however, to keep Welsh's letter in her public archives. Reading it is utterly convincing. The entire basis for the supposition that Mondrian had syphilis was an off-the-cuff comment from an unreliable source to a scholar who quoted it but did not believe it and never wanted it repeated.

One should measure the elements of "information" on Mondrian as carefully as the artist calibrated his lines.

The claim that Mondrian had contracted syphilis from a prostitute is, I believe, the chronic need for "a story" about well-known figures. That desire has resulted in no end of misinformation that has become accepted as accurate about Piet Mondrian.

XX

In 1908—here the date is certain—Mondrian made a painting he called *Devotion*, which has many of the same elements as *Passion Flower*.[691] It, too, is

[688] Letter Welsh to Bax, June 7 1994, Bax Art Archive.
[689] Letter Welsh to Bax, June 7 1994.
[690] Letter Welsh to Bax, June 7 1994.
[691] A642 *Devotie*, 1908, oil on canvas, 94 x 61 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

a portrait of a young woman with flower blossoms next to her. The following year, Mondrian would write a letter to a well-known critic, the writer Israël Querido, to explain what was on his mind when he painted it. It is vital information. While she is as lost in her own state of mind as the subject in *Passion Flower*, the girl in the painting—she appears to be about ten years old—is, rather than gloomy, rhapsodic. Knowing why Mondrian presented her in such an ecstatic state will tell us a lot.

Following the three-man show at the Stedelijk at the start of 1909, there was sufficient interest in Mondrian for Querido, who had been writing a series of articles about the artist in *De Controleur*, to print—'with the painter's permission'—the letter in its entirety. *Devotion* had provoked considerable musing, and been both attacked and admired during the exhibition. Mondrian's letter about the canvas would reveal the artist's unusual efforts at self-understanding and his wish to express himself, verbally as well as artistically, to advance his cause.

He had—it could not have been clearer—inherited from his father the urgent drive to impart a message to the world. Unlike his father, though, he cossetted his vehemence in artfulness. The son would engage, rather than intimidate, his audience.

As if to counteract his father's bellowing, he now used colors that were ingratiatingly sweet. And to avoid the weight of Pieter Mondriaan's allegories, he made his subject matter simple and innocent to a fault. *Devotion* is initially so cloying that most of us, encountering it in books or exhibitions, either skip by it quickly or deliberately turn away and flee. In her supplicating pose and excessive earnestness, this girl could have been painted by the most saccharine of the pre-Raphaelites. Her translucent white top, a flowing chiffon, resembles a communion dress in a Victorian portrait. The sentimentality of her facial expression is as old-fashioned as the blousy garment.

In other ways, however, the painting is stridently modern. The coloring, sometimes sugary, sometimes lurid, makes that of the Fauves—who had acquired their name, meaning wild men, only two years earlier—pale and understated in comparison. The red of the girl's hair is keyed up to be impossibly loud; even today, when we are used to hennas and other red-bronze dyes meant to attract attention, this color, brighter and harsher than flames, resembling, as much as anything, the orange of certain plastics, is particularly artificial. The girl's hair is not the only occurrence of that blazing red; her profile is accented by the same hue, which also appears in the pupil and along the lids of her left eye, open more widely than the right.

Mondrian has used an original and unusual technique to create a white poppy that blends into the background of the painting. He has constructed the flower essentially in the same pigments as its surroundings and the girl's high collared blouse; it gains its definition entirely through the modulation of the brushwork. Mondrian employs short strokes that radiate from a center point in the same way that the petals of an actual poppy open up and

extend themselves outwards. The white flower picks up echoes of the orange red, but the color that is aggressive in the girl's hair is now muted, for the blossom is ethereal, merging into space. It also reflects the turquoise blue that is in the girl's hair and along her face, but what is violent on the girl is completely subdued in the flower. These color harmonies provide a sense of unity, in a world that is extreme to the point of madness.

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The hues that splash across the pale face even as they ripple more gently in the background of the medium-sized canvas accentuate the girl's rapturous state. By being outside the real, they dematerialize her so that she embodies more the weightless world of the spirit than heaviness and mass and the other components of physical presence. In his letter to Querido, Mondrian acknowledges this intention. 'I only envisaged a girl conceived devotedly, or viewed devotedly, with great devotion, and, by giving the hair that sort of red, to tone down the material side of things, to suppress any thoughts about "hair," "costume," etc., and to stress the spiritual. I believe that color and line can do much toward this end […] I find the work of the great masters of the past very beautiful and very grand, but you will agree with me that everything done in our own time must be expressed very differently.' The essence of his technique, which he explains to Querido, is that 'the paint is applied in pure colors set next to each other in a pointillist or diffuse manner.'[692]

A lot of what Mondrian declares in this published letter would, no matter how dramatically his art would change from *Devotion* to the compositions of the 1920s to *Broadway Boogie Woogie*, apply to his thinking for the rest of his life. He sheds light on the relationship of his art to his involvement with Theosophy and his preoccupation with the occult, crediting Madame Blavatsky's belief system for enabling him to realize that 'clarity of thought should be accompanied by clarity of technique.' Mondrian was conscious that this point of view was counter to the trend of the time, and he regarded the recipient of his letter as one of his rare sympathizers. 'You will agree with me in this,' he assures both Querido and himself, 'but most people, at least in the Netherlands, are of a different opinion.'[693]

Mondrian seemed almost to relish the opposition to his work, even when it grew bitter. Some artists crumble when criticized; others become enraged. Mondrian took it in stride. He did not obsess, but he was entirely aware of the mainstream taste he was bucking and he enjoyed being the well-behaved pioneer, the rebel who kept his calm. The prevailing belief, Mondrian recognized, was 'that if one is able to paint as cleverly and as well as a

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[692] Letter Mondrian to Querido, published in *De Controleur*, October 23 1909, translated in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 129.
[693] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 129.

famous old master, one should be quite satisfied.'[694] He declares himself more intrepid: a man of his time. 'There are great intrinsic values or truths which remain the same throughout the ages, but form and expression are changing.' He personally considered 'the work of the masters of the past very beautiful and very grand,' but he distinguished himself from those of his contemporaries who were content to imitate the masters. For what motivated him was 'the important relationship between philosophy and art.'[695]

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It was a period of change and breakthrough in every realm of human existence. There were leaps forward in medicine, transportation, and the understanding of the human psyche; progress and hope were in the air. Mondrian was resolute that his own role in the new era was to make a powerful spiritual element central to the creation and viewing of art.

In *Devotion*, he displays his goals for his own future as an artist. The girl is giving thanks; her prayer is one of gratitude, not of want. For Mondrian, the appreciation of life's miracles was vital. Determined to use art to convey his reverence—for seeing, for the universe—he allowed to Querido that the success of art as a vehicle to reveal the depths of faith depends on the maker's skill. If an artist is good enough, his convictions will add to, rather than detract from, the quality of his art. 'I believe that a painter's conscious spiritual knowledge will have a much greater influence upon his art, and that it is merely a weakness in him—or a lack of genius—should this spiritual knowledge be harmful to his art.'[696]

Aware that emotional excess put artistic quality in jeopardy, he was on the watch for his own possible transgression. 'Should a painter progress so far that he attains definite firsthand knowledge of the finer regions through development of the finer senses, then perhaps his art will become incomprehensible to mankind, which as yet has not come to know these finer regions. […] I do not know how I shall develop, but for the present I am continuing to work within ordinary, generally known terrain, different only because of a deep substratum, which leads those who are receptive to sense the finer regions. Therefore my work still remains totally outside the occult realm, although I try to attain occult knowledge for myself in order better to understand the nature of things.'[697]

At age thirty-seven, he was devoting himself, day and night, to being awake to what was sacred and lasting. His life's task was to feel and convey the 'finer regions' clearly and effectively. 'I observe my work attaining greater consciousness and losing all that is vague.'[698]

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[694] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 129.
[695] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 129.
[696] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 129.
[697] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 129-130.
[698] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 130.

In his painting he was trying to enter territory that had nothing to do with the pulls of everyday existence. 'Art can provide a transition to the finer region, which I call the spiritual realm,' he wrote the sympathetic Querido. Mondrian was determined to follow 'the path of ascension; away from matter.'[699] But at the same time he felt he would only achieve his task of comprehensibility if his painting avoided the occult and retained its straightforwardness.

Was he consciously running from something? From sexual issues that troubled him, from a profound sense of sin nourished by the staunch Calvinism of his childhood, which he had not entirely shaken off?

In *Devotion*, he expressed his quest for purity with the portrait of a creature who was unreal in the way that most presentations of blemish-free goodness are. Fortunately, it would not be long before Mondrian stopped illustrating his point with young maidens and develop a new form for expressing his ideal.

XXI

One of the reasons that Mondrian needed his own safe mental territory is that when some critics attacked, they showed him no mercy. In 1910, fourteen paintings by Mondrian were presented like a small show of its own in the St. Lucas exhibition at the Stedelijk. [700] The mainstream art critics fired away. N.H. Wolf, the well-established and influencial critic who had written favorably of Mondrian in the past, declared his latest paintings as 'the work of a sick, abnormal man' and 'not even art.'[701] Mondrian took the salvos in stride, and cared more that four paintings were sold than that the public was reading diatribes against him. While his art remained outside mainstream taste, an increasingly powerful minority revered it. For the rest of his life, Mondrian would always have a few proponents who prized and bought his unique and groundbreaking paintings even when the larger public would not dream of doing so. The prices were modest, as they always would be, and the market was limited, but, at least, from this point forward, there was some income from the purchases.

Nardus Henri Wolf's complete reversal about Mondrian and his work stung all the more sharply because the critic, who was Mondrian's contemporary (born in Amsterdam exactly a week earlier than Mondrian) had, in 1909, become editor in chief of *De Kunst*. This weekly periodical, profusely illustrated, was an important art magazine in the Netherlands and

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[699] Mondrian in *De Controleur*, Welsh *CR I*, p. 130.
[700] Sint Lucas: 20ste Jaarlijksche Tentoonstelling. Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, April 24-June 1.
[701] N.H. Wolf, in: *De Kunst* 2(1909-10)119, as quoted in Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.

often explicitly opted for the modern movement.[702] It purportedly offered the public an impartial presentation of all current exhibitions, with a policy of disseminating information without opinions. To be declared mentally ill, his work unworthy of being called 'art,' in those pages, by a former supporter, was brutal.

Other journalists, however, jumped to Mondrian's defense. A writer for the daily newspaper in Schagen, a small city in North Holland, put the situation in perspective. The critic, who signed his or her name with only 'H.d.U,' and of whom nothing more is known—writing in that local newspaper which unfortunately was read by few of the subscribers to *De Kunst*— reports that Mondrian 'is the one at whom all the jokes and wisecracks are aimed […] while others kneel in quasi-adoration.' H.d.U continues with a rebuttal to Wolf's diatribe that was solace to Mondrian. 'Mr. Wolf claims that his art is the art of a sick man,' H.d.U correctly informs the readers, and then one-upped the accusation by reporting on hearing a painter who is 'a very serious young man say that he would like nothing better than to contract that very sickness.'[703]

H.d.U went to Amsterdam, encountered Mondrian, and 'enjoyed two hours of his silent company.' The enthusiastic journalist from the provinces reported, 'It is Mondrian's nature to follow ever upward the road he chose. . . His art springs from a powerful desire to liberate art from matter as fully as possible.' No amount of defamation would deter this committed painter from his course. 'Should everyone in the world curse the sun, it would rise just the same.' [704] For Mondrian, there could have been no kinder comparison.

The warm-hearted, free-thinking H.d.U had an extraordinary knowledge of the latest developments in Dutch modern art, and of Mondrian's unique position with regard to the others. He also had a clear perspective on N. H. Wolf's nastiness. H.d.U, obscure as he or she was, provides a valuable overview of Mondrian's art in the context of all that was happening around him, and of the role of N. H. Wolf in swaying the opinion of an entire culture regarding Mondrian's latest work: 'I read the article of N.H. Wolf about the "Luminists", whose master of all is Piet Mondriaan.' It is a very important article, which treats the development of "modernism" in painting from the beginning, starting – for the Netherlands – with Jan Sluijters, the "Prix-de-Rome-winner", the "apostle of the new direction". […] Soon it seemed, that one of his most loyal followers was Piet Mondriaan, the young talented artist, whose work already earlier had drawn attention. And also it seemed, that Mondriaan would not stay with Sluijters "method", but he

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[702] Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 105; De Vries, *Van sintels vuurwerk maken*, p. 283-284.
[703] H.d.U. 'Amsterdamsche Brieven', in: *Schager Courant* May 21 1910, as quoted in Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 81.
[704] H.d.U., *Schager Courant* May 21 1910, in Seuphor, Mondrian, p. 82.

would go even further as his master, and even in a short time. […] But Mondriaan's work remains at a distance, and it would not annoy me if I heard "mockers" say: "He is full with sweet wine". Because this work stands outside and maybe above the limit of our judgment and appreciation. The question of the editor of "De Kunst", whether we can find "deliberately" or "sense of advertisement" behind it, doesn't come from a serious person who know Mondriaan personally. The second question asked by "De Kunst", whether this art comes from Mondriaans character, may be answered affirmative, as long as "character" means: talent, tendency, spiritually complex. He is simply – it is in his nature – dependent on, to climb the road, which he chosen to. […] His working is a trying to detach the art as far as possible from the substance, what all art, which means holiness, needs to try. […] It must be hard to speak of the art and aims of a friend; but the honesty of mister Wolf is imposed to do so. He is... in his right... no less... than Mondriaan. When I was a painter, and I would see an Arum white, pure white, as I now see her pure white, than I would paint it as white. This would be my right, or rather: I couldn't do it otherwise. But now Mondriaan sees it blue, it is mandatory and his right to paint it blue. He can not paint something he does not see?! […] It is possible that Mondriaan watches over the top of the mountain, while other painters still toil to reach the top of the mountain. For sure he sees the things in another light as we do, and that light might be higher than ours. He also sees things in another shape, as the truth for poets also takes another shape than it does for us. […] But friend Wolf, and professor Dake most probably also, considers it "foolishness", as often a preach has called "foolishness", while later seemed to be a utter of the Truth. […] "Mondriaan is pathological" Wolf claims. I don't know. I do not understand all […] I feel that Mondriaans art is more than only caprice, arbitrariness, pathologically […] it is possible we stand here in front of something yet not understood. […]'[705]

XXII

Van Eeden's diatribe the previous year had forced Mondrian to develop the ballast to withstand broadside attacks. That blow from such an influential writer usually sympathetic to contemporary art had made him thick-skinned; besides, he had grown more comfortable with himself.[706] Even with Wolf declaring him deranged, and his uncle insisting on his using a new variation of the family name, Mondrian had an unshakable belief in what he was trying to do with his painting. Besides, his devoted champions, even if they were small in number, had not wavered. As his art became brighter and

[705] H.d.U., *Schager Courant*, May 21 1910.
[706] For Van Eeden as art critic, see De Vries, *Van sintels vuurwerk maken*, p. 267.

bolder, his way of applying paint more punchy and raw, they admired him all the more. But what really kept Mondrian above the fray was the calm with which he handled all attacks, his personal pacifism. Just as he had acceded to Frits's demands without fuss, he took the diatribes like water off a duck's back.

He repainted his studio on Sarphatipark. One day Mondrian charged into the home of the painter Gerrit Knap, who lived just above him. He invited Knap and his daughter to come down to his place. Having made it all black a year earlier, he had transformed it. The floor was still black, as was the wood paneled wainscottings that were about waist high. Above, the walls were now a pure, luminous white, as was the ceiling. For the moment, the closest thing to a visible art work was the canvas on the easel painted in solid white without a mark.[707]

Mondrian had created a haven. He had also done something original and revolutionary. Ever since his teenage years, Mondrian had had the willpower and bravery to do things no one else had done, but there had been intervals when he coasted and his temerity went under wraps. Now he was flying again.

Out of a combination of admiration and the wish to advance on his coattails, some avant-garde artists of lesser talent than Mondrian were banding together as a group in which they wanted to include Mondrian. In November 1910, Conrad Kickert founded, with Lodewijk Schelfhout, the Moderne Kunstkring—or Circle of Modern Art.[708] Kickert, a painter as well as a critic, was the main force behind the organization. For the next few years, he would appear to be a true friend to Mondrian—until he become someone from whom Mondrian felt impelled to have a complete separation. A bit of a gadfly, blond and fair, financially independent, the socially savvy Kickert divided his time between Paris and Amsterdam. He was more worldly than his fellow artists who had less money. He flaunted his taste for prostitutes, boastfully, as if his time with them was a mark of his manhood. He already had the devil-may-care attitude with which, many years later, he would gossip with Robert Welsh about Mondrian's alleged sex life. Kickert was someone for whom syphilis was something of which to be proud. But he also was serious and dedicated about modernism, his vocal support of Mondrian among people of influence was a boost for which Mondrian was grateful.

Kickert and Schelfhout were determined to have themselves and a few other contemporary Dutch artists considered as part of a homogenious movement because of their shared pursuit for universal meaning in their work. Knowing the succes of current French artists' groups, where the

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[707] Memories of Gerrit Knap's daughter, Josina Smeenk-Knap, as described in Bax & Welsh, *Amsterdamse ateliers*, p. 52.

[708] Announcement in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, November 29 1910 and in *Algemeen Handelsblad*, November 29 1910.

teamwork of the Fauves and the Cubists inspired books and exhibitions that helped the individual artists, they wanted the equivalent in the Netherlands. They considered the style of The Hague School, which was dominant and successful, to be vacuous, and were determined to bolster an alternative approach.[709]

Kickert developed the idea that the Kunstkring should organize annual exhibitions that would be like the famous Salons d'Automne in Paris.[710] The Salon d'Automne, founded in 1903, enabled Matisse and other artists rejected by the annual Salon, organized by the Academy, to exhibit work that was elsewhere considered too radical; by being shown as a coherent group, these painters and sculptors who would have never been accepted as isolated outsiders were viewed with greater respect. Kickert and Schelfhout intended not just to show the best of what was being done in the Netherlands, but to present exemplars of the Futurism and Expressionism being practiced in Italy and France and Germany. They invited Jan Toorop, Sluijters, and Mondrian to join them on a committee to take charge of these shows, and Mondrian consented.

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Toorop became the mouthpiece of the Kunstkring movement. He declared, "Only from a deeper and stronger understanding of the Eternal can the great, glad, strong soul and life-enhancing beauty be born, which the whole world sorely needs. […] Art can never become great, beautiful and holy as long as the artist as a man is small, un-beautiful and selfish."[711] In his notion of 'life-enhancing beauty,' the credo was close to Mondrian's; the role of 'the Eternal,' and its nature, at least as meant by Toorop, was less precise in Mondrian's thoughts.

Toorop had become a staunch Roman Catholic in 1905. He was one of a group of Dutch painters determined to make Christian doctrine central to their art. They regarded Mondrian as an outsider in this respect, and so did he. In spite of his membership in both a neo-Calvinist church and the Theosophical Society, Mondrian was increasingly disinclined to have his art

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[709] Wesselingh, 'Conrad Kickert als voorvechter van het Nederlands modernism', p. 10. Cf. Jan van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst in Nederland 1910-2000. Picasso als pars pro toto*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2001, p. 25-28.

[710] 'De voornaamste taak van den Kring is het houden van een internationale voorjaarstentoonstelling te Amsterdam. Ieder vooruitstrevend artiest, die zoekt te werken in den geest van dezen tijd, zal dan ook een aantal zijner werken kunnen inzenden.', announcement in *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, November 29 1910; 'Tot dat doel zal Amsterdam een internationale najaarstentoonstelling zien. […] Zoodat ook Amsterdam nu heeft haar Salon d'Automne […].' C. Kickert, 'Moderne Kunstkring', in: *Onze Kunst*, (1911)19, p. 35.

[711] M. Viola, 'Moderne Kunstkring', in: *Van Onzen Tijd* (1911-12)1, p. 13., quoted and paraphrased by Henkels, *Mondrian*, p. 172.

serve his faith the way a Gothic cathedral façade taught the Bible. Even though it might embody religious ideals, they were pantheistic. He had a general overarching faith in what was universal, and what would last. But no single word or rubric properly qualified it. He would teeter, if anything, on the specifics of Theosophy, and, within the next couple of years, embrace them full-force, as he had in *Passion Flower*, but Mondrian's faith was impossible to qualify, and the force he believed in could be found as much in the latest dance step or the perfection of two straight lines intersecting at a precise right angle as in the symbols within a mandala or the large *Thy Word is Truth* he had painted according to his father's dictates back in Winterswijk.[712] Other modernists—Kandinsky, Le Corbusier, Josef Albers—were more determined to evoke what, each according to his own doctrine, he considered as "spiritualism." The artists closest to Mondrian in their faith that was absolutely central to him and his art while being essentially imprecise and based on all that is cosmic were Paul Klee and Anni Albers, for whom plant growth, the orbits of planets and moons, the sun itself—all that is timeless, universal, and presumably everlasting—were the greatness that matters.

Still, in spite of his eschewal, for the most part, of religious imagery and symbolism, Mondrian's work with its powerful life force allowing no individualism, and its sublime artistry, garnered him a unique position of respect in the new organization. Mondrian might not want to make Catholic or Theosophical dogma part of his art—at least most of the time—but he was eager to find values that would serve all of humankind, and the other Kunstkring members admired his determination. His fellow committee members readily forgave his inability to be a full-time team player and looked up to him. They accepted his disdain for any activity that took him away from painting. Unlike Kickert, after all, Mondrian had to face the reality of money and earn a living; he had limited time to devote to organizational politics. Nor did he have the desire.

That summer, Mondrian again took a job making bacteriological drawings for Professor R.P. van Calcar. It now required him to live in Van Calcar's home, near Leiden. At age thirty-eight, when his friends with money were heading off for summer travel or to the seaside, Piet Mondrian, again the well-groomed and clean-cut young man rather than the meditating

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[712] Robert Welsh has described how sacred geometry affected the style and content of Mondrian's art, which is particularly true for the years of his transition from naturalism to abstraction, from around 1910 to 1919, which roughly coincided with the period of his most intense involvement with Theosophy. See Robert P. Welsh, 'Mondrian and Theosophy', in: *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944. Centennial Exhibition*, exh. Cat., Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York 1971, p. 35-51. Also Robert P. Welsh, 'Sacred Geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction', in: Edward Weisberger (ed.), *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Abbeville Press, New York 1986, p. 63-87.

bearded yogi on the breach, packed his couple of suitcases and took the train so that, in a small room tucked away in his employer's large house, he would live almost like an endentured servant. He did not mind it the least. He wrote De Iongh that it suited him to do the microscopic work to bolster his income; he preferred it to making paintings designed to please popular taste so that they were saleable.[713] The work for Van Calcar had greater integrity.

In taking on his task load for the biologist, Mondrian was instinctively attracted to the emphasis on precision and measure. The obsession over millimeters appealed to him. Accepting the reality that for now his financial needs completely compromised his life, with that move into other people's home in a city other than Amsterdam, he learned to work with the meticulousness, and the awareness of the subtle difference the slightest variable can make, that would be utterly essential to him for the rest of his life.

XXIII

On June of 1910, the first issue of a Dutch magazine devoted to Theosophy—*Eenheid: weekblad voor maatschappelijke en geestelijke stroomingen (Unity: A Weekly Journal of Social and Spiritual Trends)*—was published in The Hague. Its articles focused on vegetarianism, Buddhism, and 'sexual purity in body and spirit.'[714] Mondrian subscribed from the start, and gave a subscription to Spoor as well. Even in his exile in Van Calcar's house in the outskirts of Leiden, he stayed close to the friend with whom he had taken his first trip to Domburg and who had shown with him at the Stedelijk in January 1909.

If Mondrian strictly adhered to the tenets of Theosophy promulgated in this publication, that decision would have required his giving up a sex life—if in fact he had one—regardless of what its nature was. If the visitor to Uden and Aletta de Iongh are to be believed, this meant other men; if Mondrian's own quips late in life, when he referred to 'no longer' seeking the services of female prostitutes, were truthful, it meant stopping visits to brothels. It is less likely, given the prevailing standards of "morality" for women of the social class of his ex-fiancée as well as his future one, that he ever slept with either, so Theosophy's interdiction against sexual relation other than between a husband and wife would have had no bearing. It is possible that rather than imposing a stop to something he enjoyed, the abstinence crucial to Theosophical practice was a source of its attraction to Mondrian; the faith ruled out the need to cope with his own sexuality, and

[713] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, July 23 1910, KM 122.429.
[714] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 130.

was a means of avoiding a sense of obligation to something that made him intrinsically uncomfortable.

Mondrian would in 1920s quip to the Belgian Surrealist E.L.T Mesens, who was urging him to join an outing to a brothel that 'every bit of semen expanded is a masterpiece lost.'[715] Mondrian may have really meant that. If so, he did not even masturbate, let alone ejaculate inside someone else, since what is certain, for all that is unknown to us, is that Mondrian's drive to create artistic masterpieces superceded everything else in his life. But whether he believed what he said, or was finding a rationale for desires he stifled, is unknowable.

All that is certain is that Mondrian "had issues."

#

In any case, he did not have to deal with an active sex life while he was a boarder in the Van Calcars' house. And even though he had moved in with the biologist and his family because of his dire financial situation, Mondrian was bursting with confidence that summer of 1910. Toward the end of July, he wrote Aletta de Iongh that he had submitted an entire wall of paintings to the next St. Lucas exhibition, where his group of fourteen paintings had only gone down in June. He was excited because the new work was 'made to my own belief.'[716] Mondrian was cognizant that few people understood what he was doing, but, he assured her, his small group of devotees more than made up for his many detractors. He was ebullient over his recent sales, even if the proceeds had not covered his living expenses, he happily told his confidante, people were very enthusiastic about a large chalk portrait he had made of her.

Mondrian was yet to travel to any of the hotbeds of modernism where he would have found artists more his match than Sluijters and Toorop and Spoor. In Munich and Paris, there were first-rate painters taking art in unprecedented directions, and surely he would have been fascinated to see more of their recent work than the few paintings that made it to Amsterdam. At least, thanks to some avant-garde publications, he might have seen their breakthroughs in reproduction.[717] Even while domiciled in a Leiden suburb, his scope was becoming international; on July 10, he became a member of the Societé des Artistes Indépendants in Paris, gaining the right to show with them even though he had never been in France or would get to the show himself.[718]

From his exile in the Van Calcars' house, Mondrian opened up with exceptional candor to De Iongh about his strategies for organizing his time,

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[715] This anecdote is recounted by John Golding in the documentary video 'Mondrian: Mr Boogie-Woogie Man', Directed by Janice Sutherland, BBC London / Phaidon Press 1995.

[716] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, July 23 1910, KM 122.429.

[717] Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction*, p. 57.

[718] Welsh, *CR I*, p. 130.

and about his real feelings concerning artists' groups and the choices of how one spends one's time in life. The solitude of his single room where he could hear the noises of family life but not interact suited him. After telling his friend that he could not go see her in The Hague because he was too busy with his work for Professor Van Calcar to be away for the entire day that would be required, he acknowledged the real reason: he did not want to have to deal with his fellow painters there. 'If they happened to see me they would be cross if I didn't show my face there.'[719]

Mondrian had an extraordinary approach to the conduct of his everyday life. He anticipated what for him was the reality of human encounters, and deliberated on a course of action that would prevent his being trapped in time-wasting on negative experiences. Through Theosophy and meditation—but, above all, as a result of rational decision-making—he would avoid conflict and its consequent feeling of unbalance. His human relations tactic was to prevent the intrusion before it occurred to maintain his equilibrium and not lose any of the precious hours when he might pursue his own art, he calculated in advance how to keep unpleasantness at bay. Out of the swings of things that summer when necessity required his laboring over those biological drawings for most of his hours of daylight, he developed the modus operandi that would serve him lifelong.

Life with the Van Calcar family suited his agenda for a comfortable existence. 'And it is rather fun for someone with aristocratic leanings like me to spend some time in a villa with plenty of servants!'[720]

The biology professor's children were 'very sweet,' and Mondrian told De Iongh that he was pleased that his host did not eat meat, which meant that he was not expected to do so. Indeed he followed, to the letter of the law, the rules of conduct at the core of Theosophy, and vegetarianism was among them.

Mondrian advised De Iongh to create the balance in her life he had achieved in his. 'If there are things that bother you in The Hague, just try to ignore them and tell yourself, it's not going to last forever. '[721]

In this time period when he could not afford to live independently, and had scarcely a moment to work on his own art in spite of his desperate wish to do nothing else, he remained tranquil. Only a few years earlier, before the move to Brabant, Mondrian had been kicked hard by life. Now he had edited out anything that troubled him, and, even in circumstances most people would have been unable to bear, found balance and joy.

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Mondrian could not regulate every aspect of his existence, however. He could not control the weather. Rain prevented his working outside, and dark clouds nullified the effects of sunlight, a favorite subject. At the end of the

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[719] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 166.063.
[720] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 166.063.
[721] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 166.063.

summer at the Van Calcars', he would go back to Domburg. He wrote De Iongh that his most ardent hope was for good weather there. Incidentally, he inquired if she, too, thought it was a beautiful place.[722]

Mondrian did not prevaricate. He considered himself especially entitled to clear skies. After all, he was not like most visitors to the resort, going simply for holiday-making. It was for work, and his painting would suffer if conditions were inclement. He had made arrangements with Professor Van Calcar that would allow him the interlude. A brief reprieve from his normal obligations and living situation, its opportunities were all the more precious to him, and he was desperate for nature to coperate.

Painters are often like farmers in their dependence on the right climate conditions. In these professions, weather is not merely a matter of taste and personal preference; it is often vital to the life blood of the work. Bonnard would paint only on sunny days—he would not even open up his paint box when it was raining—and Mondrian's relationship to the weather was, at this stage of his life, much the same. But he did not like the dependence and lack of control. The variability of the days, and the untamability, would be one of the factors soon to turn Mondrian from making the nature of the world his explicit subject. Once he moved on to pure abstraction, he would work in the natural light that poured in through the high windows of his studios—whether in Paris, London, or New York—but even if the day was dark, he could function. What he could not master, Mondrian did not like.

But for now, the natural world was still the subject of his art. It had not yet occurred to him that he could create a new world of his own invention, have straight lines perform as he willed them, and not be so subject to life's vagaries. He was on the verge of a major change, but still not there; he remained vulnerable and dependent on chance.

Mondrian in the time period when he was the quarry of journalists on the rue du Départ was a victor. But almost to the age of forty, he was still in a phase of formation, subject to the emotions and drives that breed disappointment and conflict at the same time that their satisfaction can induce well-being. For this younger Mondrian, in Act One, the pleasures of life were short-lived compared to the difficulties. He would become fully tranquil and stable only once he created his walls, and, on them, an alternative universe of unimpeachable power.

#

With Aletta de Iongh—perhaps, not incidentally, the woman who would identify him as homosexual—Mondrian communicated at a deeper level than with other people. Not only did he allow himself to verbalize his own desires and tastes, but he showed rare concern for her. Although he was correct and polite, Mondrian did not often solicit much information about other people's well-being. Nor did he deeply care about it. De Iongh became the exception. Of a visit 'Letta'—his name for her when she was not 'Zus'—

[722] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 124.785.

had just made to a family in Middelburg, where everyone shared De Iongh's passion for music, he writes, 'I am so pleased for you that you could stay there for a while.' He then uses De Iongh's sojourn to these friends in a small town to weigh the advantages of urban living against those of the countryside. 'Just like you, I wouldn't be able to lead that kind of quiet life all the time, and I like *living* in a big city. Like you, I believe that when you are alone in nature, you have the best chance of getting really close to it.'[723]

It was unusual for Mondrian to open up to this degree. In so doing, he showed his true self; this was the affinity for nature he would always have, whatever his life choices and the chronic misperception of him that exists to this day.

Mondrian also gave De Iongh, as he had Querido, his views on most people's artistic taste. He was, he insisted, resigned to the indifference the majority of humankind had to good art. He had no expectation that the larger public could or would discern quality, any more than they noticed the nuances of nature. Mondrian, at least for now, accepted the insensitivity of the masses and had no dreams of converting them; his only hope was to proceed with his own work. 'But most people aren't as sensitive in that respect, as I expect you have often noticed yourself.'[724]

Beyond dispelling the myth of Mondrian as a foe of the natural world or someone insensitive to its effects, what Mondrian wrote the cellist shows him profoundly moved by the beauty of flowers. The intoxication destabilized him. Mondrian's emotions were so intense that he would, if not out of conscious plan than out of unconscious necessity, need to find a way of life where his feelings stopped throwing him into such a rapturous state that he became unable to function. Maybe this was true of sex and love as well. 'How lovely the flowers are in Zeeland, too, don't you think? Have you noticed? I think it is because they are so beautifully set off by the little white houses, and because they grow in drifts of the same type. Flowers are so exceptionally delightful, I find. There were such lovely ones last week on that square behind Brijman. The sky, too, has an extraordinary effect on me.'[725]

You may say, rightly, that the strange, drowsy feeling was simply the semi-allergic, chemical reaction some people have to flowers like lilies. But just as I remain convinced that Mondrian stopped painting actual trees and asked not to face them through open windows at those Paris lunches because in their natural form they were so overwhelming that he was at a loss for what to do with the feelings, and had converted those tree trunks and branches into razor-edged straight black vertical and horizontal lines so as to distill them to their essence while channeling his feelings into a manageable form, I think that in every way Piet Mondrian was a person of such intense

[723] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 124.785.
[724] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 124.785.
[725] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 124.785.

sensitivity that he developed his new language of abstraction, from which his individual self was removed, as a survival mechanism. It was a brilliant, positive solution from which all of humanity benefits.

#

That October, De Iongh told Mondrian that the last time they had met she had found him greatly changed. His response shows just how self-aware this taciturn man was. 'That is just superficial: I'm still the same, just a little more balanced, if I'm not mistaken. The study of Theosophy has been a great help. I find it very useful: it is truly an aid in the development of consciousness.'[726]

Pleased that De Iongh had plans to meet an expert Theosophist, Mondrian was emphatic that she needed 'regular study' to acquire a true knowledge of 'spiritism - a means of demonstrating that there is a more refined kind of existence than that which we perceive in our wakeful consciousness, but for the layman it is playing with fire. One comes uprepared into contact with forces and finer particles of matter (not yet spirit, althought it is termed thus by spiritists) which are beyond us, and from which we can therefore not learn anything. What I advise you if I may is: don't attend any more seances. Doesn't do the nerves any good either. Occultism is very different: there is preparation there, which allows for more spirituality. Such things take time! In all probability the spirit of Chopin is already in far higher regions, and no longer has contact with ordinary matter. That which spoke during the seance was probably a different influence, invisible to us, such as responding thoughts or the like. I can't make it clear to you just like that, in a flash. I myself have never attended a seance, but I know that those things are facts that cannot be gainsaid. So idiotic that some people still think it's all make-believe, don't you agree?'[727]

Mondrian was writing from Domburg. It was early October, and he was winding up his usual late-summer, early-fall sojourn there. He told De Iongh that following a quick return to Amsterdam, he would go back 'to Leiden to work and make some money. It is quite beautiful here now: the woods are looking more attractive, too […] But I have no time for all that, as I have to leave so soon. I spent most of my time studying dunes and churches. Unless you focus on a small number of things, you risk failing to make anything of all the beauty there is, don't you think? Well now, my dear Letta, warm wishes as ever from Piet.'[728]

He was finding his balance. To return to Leiden to do those microscopic drawings reproducing bacteria in painstakingly realistic detail was a counterpoint to the contemplation of the after life and the presence of ghostly spirits. He was finding his route away from those 'forces we can't

[726] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, October 1910], KM 111.937.
[727] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, October 1910], KM 111.937.
[728] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, October 1910], KM 111.937.

handle' and moving toward that 'higher realm' with 'no more contact with ordinary matter' he discerned in Chopin.[729]

To that letter to Aletta de Iongh, Mondrian added a postscript which was a window to his quandary of the moment. 'P.S: I hope Annie will come to terms with it alright. There can be a lot of beauty there, too, and of a more realistic kind of beauty than in art, eh?'[730] The details elude us. We do not know who Annie was. When Mondrian referred to 'much beauty there,' the 'there' might have meant in Annie, or in De Iongh's surroundings. What we do know is that Mondrian was weighing an essential issue, and still was not fully resolved. *Something* had 'more realistic kind of beauty than in art.'

XXIV

Mondrian had been in Domburg for six weeks when he wrote De Iongh his encomium to all 'the beauty around,' summoning the need to focus. It was the third summer that he had gone there, but the first time he was on his own, rather than with Spoor.[731] De Iongh had been correct in noting a change in him. His new concentration, and the redolent spiritualism he described in himself, was copiously evident. His art, also, had undergone a transformation.

Since arriving on the edge of the dunes in the last week of August, Mondrian had worked almost exclusively on a single large blue and yellow painting of the sand and sea.[732] He had started it long before. He may have begun the canvas, one of the biggest he had ever painted, the preceding autumn, following his time in Domburg that summer. At the latest, he had begun it at the start of the current year, because he had shown it at an early stage in the St Lucas spring exhibition. Now he continued to revise it. The previous summer, he had been exceptionally prolific. Mondrian was developing what would become, from 1910 on, a lifelong habit of making perpetual adjustments to color and form. He perpetually increased or decreased the intensity of the hues and the measures of his lines. This painting was a first foray into a new reduction of his palette, and it demanded an unprecedented level of precision so that he could maximize the rhythm and achieve a certain balance. It was not a simple equilibrium he wanted. Rather, he sought a rich interplay of a myriad of elements. The balance Mondrian craved could not be a straightforward mirroring of left and right, or a perfect emanation in all directions from a single center point.

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[729] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, October 1910], KM 111.937.
[730] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, October 1910], KM 111.937.
[731] 'This year I will go to Zeeland alone, Spoor will not go.' Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, August 1910], KM 116.063.
[732] A708 *Zomer, Duin in Zeeland*, 1910, oil on canvas, 134 x 195 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

He was working toward the principle that would underlie all of his work through the Boogie Woogies he would paint at the end of his life. It was the idea of a form of balance achieved with a multiplicity, even an infinity of elements. In his way, Mondrian presented worlds as complex as all the inner workings of the human body, or as the entire earth with all of its variables of life on and in sea and land. He wanted to evoke multiplicity, but to give it complete coherence. In this large canvas on which he was still laboring—a labor of love—every angle, and every variation in the light intensity of the single yellow and single blue, had to be just so.

He did not complete it during that longer stay in Domburg. He did finish a luminous, bravely simplified painting of the lighthouse at Westkapelle, but that picture was still in the Pointillist idiom, and he was able to let it go. In the large dune painting, he had finally put Pointillism behind him. He was progressing to a style more completely his own, and it was demanding in a new way. Mondrian had always been a careful and painstaking painter, but his further refinement required increased rigor.

Reducing his output of new art to practically nothing, Mondrian was making himself broke. He had nothing recent to sell, and the work he had on hand found no buyers. On October 3, he wrote Schelfhout from Domburg that he would be there for two more weeks. It was because he had sold nothing at all that he would have to return to Leiden to take up doing bacteriological drawings again. He was discouraged, and wondered if the art world in Paris, where Schelfhout was based, would be more hospitable to him than the Dutch.[733]

Mondrian had, however, been turned down at the Salon d'Automne. It was a stinging rejection. Adding to his pain at not being in this show of recent art, when he told Sluijters that this was because the Salon was too conventional, Sluijters had disagreed and said it was "highly modern."[734] Mondrian groused to Schelfhout that it had added insult to injury.

Mondrian implored Schelfhout to go to the Salon and tell him what he thought. Similarly, would his friend in Paris go to the 'Union Internationale des Beaux Arts et des Lettres, Alcassar [sic] d'Eté, Champs Elysées. Write me once what kind of work there is, whether it is in our vein, or not.'[735] The 'in our vein' was telling. Mondrian felt he was not alone in his battle, and that in Schelfhout, at least, he had a loyal friend who was moving against the tide the way he was.

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[733] Letter Mondrian to Lodewijk Schelfhout, October 3 1910. RKD #0613 inv.nr. 73.
[734] Letter Mondrian to Lodewijk Schelfhout, October 3 1910. RKD #0613 inv.nr. 73.
[735] Letter Mondrian to Lodewijk Schelfhout, October 3 1910. RKD #0613 inv.nr. 73.

XXV

When Mondrian returned to Amsterdam before going to work for Van Calcar in Leiden, he continued to work on the large painting of dunes. He was about to re-enter the world of infinitesimal detail, making microscopic drawings that required the most delicate handwork to achieve utmost accuracy. He knew how laborious the exercise would be, and how confined his life would be as a paid employee in the house of his boss's family. With the enormous canvas in front of him, he was immersed in an opposite world; a broad and sweeping vision, generalized rather than meticulous, spectacularly loose. He was painting the essence of freedom.

Mondrian had reduced his vocabulary to large patches of blue—subtly gradated, some with a hint of yellow in them—on a white background. There was very little else. He had reworked the tonalities and dimensions so that the minimal elements had full force. Finally, he completed the intense and prolonged labor. The result is sublime. *Summer, Dune in Zeeland* gives the deceptive impression of having been accomplished in a state of complete relaxation. Four feet four inches high and six feet four inches wide, the painting has a boldness that engulfs the viewer both because of its overall size and the force of the brushstrokes.

When it had first been shown, in its earlier incarnation, at the St Lucas spring exhibition, the canvas had been attacked, predictably for such a brave and unusual artwork. The critic for *De Telegraaf*, his former drawing professor at the Rijksakademie C.L. Dake, wrote that, having seen it at a distance of between six to eight meters, he calculated that thirty-eight meters would have been a more appropriate minimum, for only then did it read as dune, sea and sky. 'There was no need for so much chemical-opting splashing about […] the piece could best be reduced to a sixteenth of its size."[736]

Certain critics could not damn Mondrian sufficiently. Wolf, in *De Kunst*, wrote this was 'no longer the art of painting, even no longer art.'[737] Another reviewer declared, "The structure is unsound […] too much subordinated to the effort to find expression for the spiritual semblance.'[738] At least Kickert defended the work in the magazine *Onze Kunst*, while admitting an initial struggle to understand it. This 'simple dune […] at first twinkles before your eyes, but in times becomes very satisfactory—the vibrating sun blaze(s?) upon whitened sand.'[739]

Today, when the human eye has become used to looking at large paintings that teeter between abstraction and representation, and the way we instinctively read art is dramatically different from what it was a century

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[736] Dake. *De Telegraaf*, May 4 1910, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 467.
[737] Wolf, *De Kunst*, May 14, 1910, as quoted in: Welsh, *CR I*, p. 467.
[738] Steenhoff, *De Ploeg*, II, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 467.
[739] Kickert, *Onze Kunst*, May 14 1910, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 467.

ago, we quickly perceive the finished painting—which, of course, had progressed considerably between its showing in April of 1910 and its completion that autumn, as a dune landscape. So long as we are not right up against it, the reflection of the blue sky on the white sand is easy to apprehend.

The majesterial scale and spareness of the brushwork give the intense fantastic power. The generous dimensions, and Mondrian's painting élan infuse this image of the land's end and the distant horizon with the physical and spiritual grandeur they warrant. The rich blues penetrate us. Mondrian had succeeded in elevating his art to the spiritual plane he was more and more eager to inhabit.

XXVI

It was not only his limited output that reduced Mondrian to penury. Some critics' antipathy to him made it impossible to make ends meet with the sale of his art work. Once Mondrian returned to Van Calcars's house in Leiden that October, he would remain there making his bacteriological drawings until the following spring. Life with the biology professor and his family was as agreeable as the situation would allow. Mrs Van Calcar took Mondrian to concerts, where he began to develop his very definite taste in music. After one performance, he wrote De Iongh that he considered Haydn and Mozart 'too weak and tame and of course Saint-Saëns better.'[740] The 'of course' before the name Saint-Saëns was because Mondrian automatically expected what was more recent and modern, and less famous, to be better than what was old and beloved by many. Besides, Saint-Saëns was French, and Mondrian was increasingly antipathetic to everything German or Austrian. Particularly in the Winterswijk area, there was a strong affinity between the Netherlands and Germany, the border within cycling distance; the more Mondrian developed, the more he turned to Paris as the center of civilization. His dislike of all he considered Germanic would eventually replace his anti-Semitism as his reigning prejudice, and the only one to which he ever gave voice.

Living with the Van Calcars, he was free to take off during work holidays. Mondrian spent Christmas of 1910 in Arnhem with his widower father.[741] However much the literature on Mondrian insists on his alienation from his natal family, he remained loyal and devoted to the downtrod Calvinist now living in retirement. But he was not intended to living in the Netherlands forever. With his taste for Saint-Saëns and his membership in the

[740] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, November 1910], KM 118.578.
[741] 'With Christmas I will go to Arnhem for a couple of days', Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, November 1910], KM 118.578.

Indépendants, Mondrian nodded increasingly toward France in other ways. In an exhibition in Nantes from January through March of 1911, he showed two paintings for which he used French titles—*Soleil de Printemps* and *Matin d'été.*[742] Possibly—in the country where modern painting was being accorded a high level of respect—he could survive as an artist.

XXVII

The first two Mondrian paintings presented in France were modest efforts. One showed a castle, the other a lighthouse in Zeeland. In their Pointillist style and bright colors, they introduced the man who made them as a gifted but unexceptional artist working in one of the latest styles. In an era when Cubism and other revolutionary styles were taking hold alongside Pointillism, these pictures were admirable without being especially captivating. A painting like *The Red Cloud* or *Woods near Oele* or one of his large recent canvases of dunes would have packed a punch; this initial foray into the milieu where Picasso and Matisse were taking painting to unknown realms in the aftermath of Cézanne's death was innocuous.

Mondrian's interaction with French culture and the latest pioneering art was, for now, only tentative. He was still in a Leiden suburb making his meticulous drawings of bacteria. He was restless, though, and soon referred to the Van Calcars's house as 'this prison.' At the end of March, the day before leaving and returning to his old address at Sarphatipark 42 in Amsterdam, he wrote De Iongh with joy, that at last, after nearly half a year, he would be able to escape it.[743]

How glad he would be to 'work a delicious period for my own.'[744] Once he was no longer 'so incredibly busy' with the money-making work, and had his freedom back, he would begin to live as he wanted. He told De Iongh he had subscribed to a series of Beethoven concerts in The Hague and said he would let her know when he was coming.[745] To be able to paint in his own way and listen to good music: this more than anything else was what he wanted in life.

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The crosscurrents between Amsterdam and Paris were picking up pace, meanwhile. In April 1911, just as Mondrian's *Soleil* went on view in the Societé des Artistes Indépendants show in Paris, the spring St. Lucas exhibition featured twenty Fauve paintings by Kees van Dongen, a Dutch artist living in Paris. Now more than ever, Van Dongen's name was on the tongue of everyone in the Netherlands who was interested in Modernism.

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[742] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 25.
[743] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, March 1911], KM 117.595.
[744] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, March 1911], KM 117.595.
[745] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, March 1911], KM 117.595.

Sluijters, with whom Mondrian served on the committee of Kickert's Moderne Kunstkring, sang Van Dongen's praises.[746] Van Dongen had gone further than any other Dutch artist in breaking away from any trace of Academism, and was accepted as a full-fledged Fauve. Notwithstanding his appreciation for Van Dongen—he wrote positively about him in his autobiographical essay *Toward the True Vision of Reality*—Mondrian cancelled his membership in St. Lucas.[747] Then, just after resigning from St Lucas, he also left Arti.[748] Separating himself from the two most established organizations for young artists in the Netherlands, Mondrian was making a strong statement against all he deemed trendy rather than based on serious vision. He would never have acknowledged it, but he was echoing his father by breaking away from former allies and declaring them insufficiently serious.

Mondrian no longer really belonged where he was. Restless and floundering, he was searching for new meaning, and a different way of life. When Sluijters and Kickert talked to him about Cubism as it was developing in France, and showed him reproductions of Cubist painters, he was captivated. On Saturday May 13 1911, Mondrian took a train to Paris.

We know this from a letter to Aletta de Iongh, in which he said 'next Saturday I go to Paris for 10 days' and he said he was confident that the trip 'would be very instructive.' He was 'gradually getting back to my work again,' and was counting on Paris to help make that happen. [749]

Like his first journey to Brabant, that maiden trip to Paris was a cautious investigation to enable him to evaluate another way of life. Presumably, he stayed with Conrad Kickert, saw the sights of the French capital, and looked at the latest art at the 'Salon des Indépendants', where one of his own paintings was exhibited.[750] He wrote a postcard of the Notre Dame to Simon Maris, saying: 'I benefit a lot from being here. Everything is great and grandiose.'[751]

What he had concluded about his future by the time he took the train back to the Netherlands after ten days in Paris is unknowable. But in the autumn Mondrian would engage Greta Heijbroek and declare his plan to live as a married man in the Netherlands.

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[746] Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 110.
[747] 'It was during this early period of experiment that I first went to Paris. The time was around 1910 when Cubism was in its beginnings. I admired Matisse, van Dongen, and the other Fauves […]', Piet Mondrian, *Toward the True Vision of Reality,* Valentine Gallery, New York 1941.
[748] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 98.
[749] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, early May 1911], KM 126.307.
[750] Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction*, p. 57-58; Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 25; Van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst*, p. 28.
[751] Postcard from Mondrian to Simon Maris, dated May 19 1911, RKD #0257 inv.nr.18.

XXVIII

He returned from the days in Paris full of new ideas. He would put them to work, first in Amsterdam and later that summer in Veere, a port town dating back to the late Middle Ages.[752] It was a bit nearer than Domburg was to a broad beach in the dunes, which he made the subject of a large seascape.[753] It was eight kilometers away, an easy reach by bicycle on the flat terrain.

The large painting of the sea had a very different feeling from anything Mondrian had done before. And it showed no connection to anything he had seen in Paris. Something was going on inside Mondrian psychologically. Its precise nature is unknowable, but it had a hallucinatory intensity.

The deep purples and violets of the seascape give it an extra-terrestrial aspect. To viewers of our own era, the colors conjure science fiction films, the domain of weird happenings with other-worldly characters and monsters and ghosts. In the dunes of the previous years, the sunshine, if not warm in temperature, was warm in character: the light was celebrative and happy. This sole work from the summer of 1911, however, would have suited one of those séances about which Mondrian wrote De Iongh, in which unsettling apparitions would emerge.

The year before, Mondrian had met another of his significantly younger friends who would offer him vital encouragement and support. 'On a bright Spring morning', the thirty-eight-year-old painter encountered nineteen-year old Louis Alexander Abraham Saalborn, cousin of Eva de Beneditty.[754] Saalborn wanted to become a painter, and Mondrian's work was his main inspiration. Later he would make his career in theater, but now he was having modest success as a painter and art writer. In the magazine *De Kunst* that November, Saalborn would write of Mondrian's new painting of the sea and dunes, and other smaller dunes painting from the year before, were 'miraculous constructions for a foreigner to his world, actually color constructions, and these are completely unnatural. And yet here again there is a world of quivering joy for those who have learned to think attentively and with feeling. Dunes are nowhere such as this in reality; however, so they can be in memory, like a fata morgana, a miraculous landscape in the deep courtyard of the spirit. So might the phenomena of life be, intimate, glorified by the loving mind of a silent artist.'[755]

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[752] The *Middelburgsche Courant* of July 27 mentioned Mondrian's participation to the exhibition of painters of Walcheren as 'P. Mondriaan, Veere', with 3 works. Cf. Joosten, *CR II*, p. 99.

[753] B1 *Duinlandschap*, (July-September) 1911, oil on canvas, 141 x 239 cm Gemeentemuseum.

[754] Louis Saalborn, 'Mondriaan zag in mij de schilder', in: *De Telegraaf* March 12 1955. I thank Sjoerd van Faassen for kindly reminding me of the fact that Saalborn and De Beneditty were relatives.

[755] Saalborn, 'Piet Mondriaan en anderen', in: *De Kunst* IV, November 4, 1911; as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 468.

Mondrian devoted most of the summer exclusively to working on a large figurative triptych which had nothing to do with his physical location. Its allegorical subject matter was blatantly Theosophical. When he was back in Amsterdam in August, all he wanted to do was concentrate his efforts on completing this work which possessed his thoughts. Again, however, he had to make copies of paintings in the Rijksmuseum to earn some money.[756] In a letter postmarked August 17, he wrote De Iongh how exceptionally busy he was—not just doing the two commissioned copies, but also preparing for a show being put on by the Moderne Kunstkring.[757] This was now the only artistic organization with which he had remained affiliated. The exhibition was going to be held at the Stedelijk, and had exceptional importance for him, for it would show the latest art being made not just in Amsterdam, but elsewhere. How he would be presented in the show was no small matter. He wanted to finish and show the triptych.

Determined as he was to complete the triptych and finished some smaller paintings, Mondrian broke away from his work on them to go to Arnhem to spend his usual week with his father.[758] The time with Pieter Mondriaan was a ritual he would not violate. Whether or not he enjoyed it was irrelevant; he behaved according to a code. And he managed to finish the triptych as soon as he returned to Amsterdam.

#

The Moderne Kunstkring's show was called 'The International Exhibition of Modern Art.' 'International' meant mainly French—with a small bit of Dutch. It was extraordinary—an art show of the highest caliber, put together quickly by a group of painters with limites funds and lots of energy. The centerpiece was twenty-eight works by Cézanne, who had died five years earlier. There was also work coming by Picasso, Braque, Derain, Dufy, Le Fauconnier, and other leading French artists, less well known today but exceptional.[759]

Conrad Kickert, the main organizer, insisted not only that Mondrian's work be included, but that there be six paintings by him. One would be the largest work in the entire exhibition. Kickert had a fealty which made him unlike anyone else in Mondrian's life. Together they selected canvases by Mondrian of dunes, a windmill, a church, and flowers. Whether people

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[756] 'This assignement [for the copies] was undoubtedly a reference to the copies of the anonymous *Copy after "The Fool" by Frans Hals* in the Rijksmuseum, for which he had signed up in the Copybook of the museum on August 14, and of the *Portrait of Count Johannes van den Bosch* by Cornelis Kruseman, also in the Rijksmuseum, for which he had signed up on August 24.' Joosten, *CR II*, p. 99.

[757] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iong, [Wednesday evening, postmarked August 17 1911, which was a Thursday], KM 116.389.

[758] Letter Mondrian to De Iongh, KM 116.389.

[759] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 99. Cf. Loosjes-Terpstra, *Moderne kunst*, p. 111; Van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst*, p. 28-41.

hated or loved their unusual colors and radical approach to representation, they made a strong impression. They were courageous and original, and unlike anything else in the exhibition. But one of Mondrian's paintings was guaranteed to generate the loudest reaction of all. It was the large and strident work that had preoccupied him for much of the summer and that he had slaved to complete to his own satisfaction prior to the opening on October 6: *Evolution.*[760]

#

When the Kunstkring show opened at the Stedelijk Museum, Mondrian's large altarpiece-like assemblage of three oils on canvas brought viewers to a full halt. Today, most people who go to a Mondrian exhibition expect aesthetic sublimeness. The general audience is drawn to the artist's work for the qualities that render its charm universal: a well-tempered visual language, balance, and a radiant joy. Few Mondrian fans have the taste that attracts people to psychedelic imagery and motorcycle clothing. They expect a lightness of touch, and an all-encompassing feeling of grace. The "Evolution triptych" has none of that. Gaudy in color, emotionally wrought, the behemoth is a deliberate representation of inner vision and growth devoid of subtlety. Its offputting colors and forms shout "I have a message." The Kalhil Gibran-like sincerity suggests that Mondrian was finally having his adolescence.

Clearly your scribe is deeply ambivalent about this painting. I hate this triptych as an artwork. But with my goal of getting inside an artist who did not want others to get inside him, and who, whether or not he really wanted to know himself, was disinclined to own up to his inner self in front of others—it is a lodestone. Fulfilling my obligation as a biographer by spending excruciating hours in front of this offensive blast of hideous colors applied to sophomoric subject matter, I discovered a gold mine.

#

As he approached his fortieth birthday, Mondrian had, with unrelenting earnestness, taken it upon himself to depict the stages of human existence as he now perceived it. He presented the soul on a journey from materialism to spiritual freedom. The concept was appealing. The voice, however, was devoid of the grace and subtlety requisite for Mondrian's art to succeed. Most of the time, from the earliest woodland scenes to the late abstractions, he had what it took, but it seems that the upcoming milestone of middle age was a trauma for him.

His aesthetic failures are fascinating, though. They reveal the forces that could grip Mondrian so powerfully that he lost his better judgment. *Evolution* is in many ways the truest instance of autobiography in his life. That he lacked his usual finesse and self-mastery when baring his soul says a great deal. Concomitantly, he painted like an angel when creating walls and

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[760] A647 *Evolutie*, c.1911, oil on canvas, middle panel 183 x 87,5 cm; side panels 178 x 85 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

keeping his private self at bay. But sometimes his demons threw him off course.

#

This combine of paintings feels so personal and intimate, so private in nature that most of us feel we don't belong there which, in addition to its garish appearance, is why we shun it. The soul in each of its three stages appears in the form of a bizarre naked woman. She changes in aspect, but she consistently has thin and flaccid arms, broad shoulders, small breasts, and a large and sturdy torso. Since the canvaves portraying her are nearly six feet high, with the bottoms slicing her mid-thigh, in reality she would be about eleven feet tall.

These appear to be three representations of the same woman, who Van den Briel identifies as 'Liesbeth,' from Laren.[761] Still, even if Mondrian used a particular individual as his model, she has been abstracted beyond recognizability. Geometry, rather than flesh and blood, rules. Her head is a compendium of straight lines and sharp angles; with its razor-sharp chin and jaw line, it resembles a steel helmet.

Her body could make one wonder if Mondrian had ever actually seen a naked woman. The vagina resembles a little boy's drawing of one; pre-pubescent boys traditionally envision the female genitalia as the absence rather than the presence of something, and indicate the slit as a straight vertical line on the lower belly extending between the separation of the legs and the navel. Mondrian, nearing age forty, has rendered it exactly in that way.

All three images of this naked woman are desexualized, and quintessentially uninviting. Everything is closed tight: her eyes, her mouth—and, of course, her sexual organs. The only openings are within the symbolic flowers.

Whether the source was real or imagined, whether the images recapitulate a grim sight that Mondrian had actually experienced, or betray his lack of knowledge and lurid fantasy of women's bodies, these paintings offer a horrific portrait of femaleness. One colleague discussing the triptych with me maintained it is 'a mystical progression toward enlightenment, therefore, for a mystic like Mondrian, these women were necessarily represented as asexual or abstracted.'[762] To him, the three women were not discomfiting. But I find them frightful.

Is that *my* issue? It is not a rhetorical question.

The woman on the left, representing an attachment to what is material, has her eyes closed and appears to clench her teeth. Mondrian has left no doubt as to the wastefulness of her values. The right-hand image symbolizes the next stage of the progression toward a better life, by suggesting the

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[761] Aleid Loosjes-Terpstra, 'Mondriaan in een donkere spiegel', in: *Jong Holland* 5(1989)5, p. 13.

[762] Conversation with Matthias Persson, Paris, April 2016.

perception of the divine and of the holy light; although the woman still has her eyes shut, she now looks serene. The middle canvas is the summa, an allegory of the ascent to purity. At last the former materialist has her eyes wide-open. Oversized in a way that today seems like absolute kitsch, those orbs indicate vision on its highest level.[763]

In the same time period when he was devoting himself day and night to this triptych, Mondrian wrote Arnold Saalborn, brother of Louis, 'I think the ordinary human being seeks beauty in material life, but I believe the artist should not do this. He should wish for nothing from the material world: he must be alone and stand alone. He must create on a level that is immaterial: that of the intellect.'[764]

It was not just theoretical. Mondrian was stating the values which would guide his life, and which he would follow rigorously 'Being alone means (to the great) turning to the inner self, to self-knowledge, knowledge of humanity, of the man-god and the divine.'[765] The goal of life is, he was convinced, to reach that 'divine.' In order to achieve that, the seekers must search their souls, and meditate, in solitude. They must escape life's normal distractions. That was the elevated state he presented in the largest, victorious creature in the middle.

#

Heavy-handed, painfully sincere, full of his father's fire-and-brimstone pronouncement of values by which to live, suffering from lurid colors, and tedious symmetry—and reflecting a surprising descent into the sort of late nineteenth-century style better suited to the bakery façades and theater posters it resembles, and which proliferated in Amsterdam, than to fine art—*Evolution* reveals the deepest yearnings of Mondrian as he approached the age of forty, and the values that would govern his life going forward. The artist renders that triumphant middle figure incorporeal, a key element to her having attained the desired state of being, and in so doing encapsulates the attitude toward human conduct which was hardening in him—although he had still not entirely realized it.

The creatures to the left and right of this personification of purity are grounded on the earth; concomitantly, their eyelids are sealed. Their physicality prohibits them from seeing. Purity, on the other hand, floats. She is less fleshy—her breasts and hips are not as pronounced as those of the ladies at her sides—which is what enables her to rise higher them. Her disc-like eyes fathom the truth. Her incorporeality and vision endow her with a

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[763] For the influence of Theosophy on *Evolution*, see, among others, Welsh, 'Mondrian and Theosophy', p. 43-48; Geurt Imanse, John Steen, 'Achtergronden van het Symbolisme', in: Carel Blotkamp, *Kunstenaren der idee. Symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland, ca. 1880-1930*, Staatsuitgeverij, Den Haag 1978, p. 30-31.

[764] Letter Mondrian to Arnold Saalborn, [no date], RKD #0613 inv.nr. 71.

[765] Letter Mondrian to Arnold Saalborn, [no date], RKD #0613 inv.nr. 71.

state of serenity. The other two grimace, and have their necks tilted backward in pain, while she is in balance. Mondrian's formula is not one with which most of us would agree—that because a woman is not voluptuous, she lacks sexual desire—but this middle figure represents his own ideal of being free of erotic desire and removed from materialism.

This is not to say that Mondrian would live as a monk. Again, anything we think about his sex life is conjecture. We do not know for sure what he had done in the past, or if he had indeed renounced sexual intercourse, and decided to practice abstinence for the rest of his life. The triptych depicts asexuality as the highest state of being, but even if Mondrian entertained the idea for himself, within months he would engage to marry, so he was, at best, on the fence. He went off, however, without getting married.

Still, he would not deny himself physical pleasure in his way. He would kiss women spontaneously and become an avid dancer. Yet in his own way he would opt for personal denial. He would live modestly, caring only about money to the extent that it allowed him to have a bare-bones existence that enabled him to paint. His only form of materialism was a preference for good clothing. He craved purification in both his life and his art. Vision and seeing were his subsuming goals. He wanted to create paradise optically, and enter it spiritually. It would suit him well to make the steps others might consider sacrifices but which for him were happy escapes.

#

On October 9, 1911, while *Evolution* was on view in the Moderne Kunstkring show, a review appeared in *De Telegraaf* in which the triptych was singled out. Again the critic was his former professor. Dake commended its quality of tone and color, but said that the subject was 'tedious'—the word in Dutch is saai—and that a text would be required if one was to understand it.[766]

Two of Mondrian's fellow artists criticized him similarly. The painter Ferdinand Hart Nibbrig wrote the art critic Albert Plasschaert that he was not charmed by Mondrian's 'astral manifestations.'[767] And Lodewijk Schelfhout 'collapsed against the sofa laughing' when he saw his paintings at the exhibition.[768]

An article in *De Controleur* on October 14 must have infuriated Mondrian's uncle by confirming his worst fears. It identified the artist of *Evolution* as Frits Mondriaan, before going on to 'three gigantic blue human figures, all with square eyeballs, in such relief that they bulge through the eyelids.'[769]

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[766] Dake, *De Telegraaf* October 9 1911, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 421.
[767] Letter Hart Nibbrig to Plasschaert, October 30 1911, as quoted in: Carel Blotkamp, *Mondriaan in detail*, Veen/Reflex, Utrecht 1987, p. 106. Cf Welsh, *CR I*, p. 423.
[768] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0163 inv.nr. 73.
[769] *De Controleur* October 14 1911, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 421.

This was, almost unanimously, how reviewers felt about the work which in Mondrian's own eyes was one of his most important public achievements to date. The critic for *Het Nieuws van den Dag* on October 25 said, in reference to *Evolution*, that other work by Mondrian 'led us to expect more from this painter.'[770] On October 30, in the *Arnhemsche Courant*—the paper Mondrian's father could read—there was a reference to 'bluish green misses with reddish blue eyes, a representation of "evolution," of which no one knows what to make, the painter probably included.'[771] That particular jab stung Pieter Mondriaan directly; most everyone he knew in Arnhem read the slur, which attacked not only his son's artistic skill but his clarity of mind.

Some pundits, however, were more sympathetic. A review in the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* on October 12 praised the modeling of the figures and the 'penetrating expression in their features devoid of all earthiness.'[772] On the 15th, Willem Steenhoff, who was usually sympathetic to Mondrian, declared, 'However immature this work may be—and certainly not strong in its basic idea—there is nonetheless a bearing which impresses.'[773]

Mondrian was, by now, used both to outright attacks and this sort of damning with faint praise. A compliment prefaced with the statement that, at age forty, he was still making 'immature' work was not a dream. But he probably did not seek out all the reviews or read the papers every day. Nor did he take to heart what people said about him; at least, he did not show any sign that he did. Nonetheless, taciturn as he seemed, he must have been grateful for his rare championship. Mondrian's friend Arnold Saalborn, who wrote about *Evolution* in *De Kunst*, was a comfort. In regard to who Mondrian would ultimately become in twentieth-century art, Saalborn was an astute commentator. In this article that appeared on November 4, he describes *Evolution* in depth, saying that on the left and right the woman is 'desiring happiness,' while in the middle 'she possesses happiness, and is able to grant it without ceasing as long as she lives.' Saalborn commends 'the delicate beauty and elevated, noble purity of lines and tints […] the intensity and the sincerity of this dream of sensations, the sacred more than the human ecstasy of happiness.' The wide eyes of the woman in that transported state of sacred ecstasy indicate, according to Saalborn, a degree of happiness well beyond any joy the viewer could possibly know personally. Saalborn goes on to say, 'Through all of this Piet Mondriaan seems to me a person of genius.'[774]

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[770] *Het Nieuws van den* Dag October 25 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR* I, p. 422.
[771] *Arnemsche Courant* October 30 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR* I, p. 422.
[772] *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* October 12 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR I*, p. 421.
[773] Willem Steenhoff, *De Amsterdammer Weekblad,* October 15 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR* I, p. 421.
[774] Saalborn, *De Kunst,* November 4 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR* I, p. 422.

Readers of *De Kunst* probably did not realize that the critic and his subject were friends when they read Saalborn's observation that Mondrian 'carries around with him the fatality of his subtle geniality.' Saalborn explains: Mondrian does not construct 'toward the outside, toward the beyond, as did the Sphinx builders and Michelangelo, as did Dante' but 'constructs toward the inside, toward the unfathomable depths and tenderness of the soul, as does the bee, forming its cells and filling them with golden honey.'[775] Saalborn has succeeded in perceiving, in spite of the drawbacks of the "Evolution Triptych", qualities that elude most viewers, me among them. To recognize the faith in universal beauty that would take such extraordinary form in the work Mondrian would paint a decade later shows exceptional prescience.[776]

XXIX

The same fall that Mondrian completed and showed his altar-like exigesis on the three stages of human emotional and spiritual development, he became engaged to marry.

Greta Heijbroek was from a solid bourgeois family. Her father was an Amsterdam merchant, her brother, M.J., a banker who was sufficiently well-heeled to buy Mondrian's paintings. Mondrian had first met her in the spring of 1909, when her family hired him as her private art teacher. Heijbroek had first come to Mondrian's studio so that he could give her painting lessons in the time period when Eva de Beneditty imagined him becoming her husband. Although Mondrian and Heijbroek visited her parents' country house in Laren together that April—they both signed the guest book—we have no knowledge of whether they did or did not see one another between then and the fall of 1911.[777] Her name does not appear in any letters from Mondrian's half year with the Van Calcars near Leiden, his summer holidays in Domburg, or the intervals when he was in Amsterdam. We do not know of any of his friends mentioning her. But in October of 1911, out of the blue, there was an engagement party for Mondrian and Heijbroek in her family's villa in Laren, the same lovely country house they had visited together two years earlier when he had briefly been her art teacher.

Kickert and Schelfhout attended that celebration, and looked forward to seeing their thirty-nine-year-old friend at the altar.[778] Later that month, at

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[775] Saalborn, *De Kunst,* November 4 1911, as quoted in Welsh*, CR* I, p. 422.
[776] Cf. Hans Janssen, *Mondriaan in Amsterdam*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2013, p. 116-117. Janssen claims that Saalborn closely represents the intentions of the artist, also because Mondrian might have talked about it with Saalborn,
[777] Letter Karin Lony-Heybroek to Joop Joosten, March 26 1991, copy in Bax Art Archive.
[778] Bax, *Mondriaan en zijn vrienden*, p. 42 note 80; Welsh, *CR I*, p. 135 note 74.

the opening of the Moderne Kunstkring exhibition, Mondrian presented Heijbroek to Jan Toorop as his fiancée; the upcoming marriage seemed a sure thing, and Mondrian's friends approved his taste and looked forward to the wedding.[779] Planning his life with a woman from a family with means, Mondrian was heading toward middle class stability and secure domesticity, and the people who knew him in Amsterdam were pleased that by the time he was forty he would be settled down into a more solid living situation with an agreeable partner.

We know nothing of what happened next except that at the start of 1912 Mondrian had moved to Paris and their engagement had ended. Greta could not have been more surprised.

She probably had no idea that the abruptly canceled marriage fit a pattern. Yet again, an artistically inclined woman from a wealthy background had thought she was having a serious romance with Mondrian, only to have him retreat.

#

Most accounts of Mondrian's life report his relations with women very differently. While the tribulations of his various unresolved relationships—with the adoring Eva de Beneditty and the unfortunate Greta Heijbroek—who, if not actually stranded at the altar, felt that way—and his others "almost" alliances are based on verifiable documentation from the time in which they occurred, they are mostly left out of what most self-anointed authorities on Mondrian reported later on, and which has become the mainstream version of my subject's love life.

Conrad Kickert became responsible for the impression most people have that Mondrian was often in pursuit of women who rejected him. Kickert often had Mondrian as a guest at his villa at Zandvoort, by the sea. If Kickert could be believed, on one visit, Mondrian perpetually unsuccessful in his amorous pursuits, fell in love with 'a beautiful blonde, also a guest at the villa.'[780] The woman would hardly give Mondrian the time of day, Kickert later told Michel Seuphor, who reported it as a fact. Seuphor quotes Kickert as saying 'Poor Piet. […] It was always the same story every time he fell in love, and it always upset him.'[781] Seuphor, who met Mondrian nearly a decade later and knew him until his death, concurs: 'Mondrian's entire life was marked by such failures, affairs which were always cut short.'[782] Referring to the broken marriage engagement, Seuphor simply writes, 'He was always prone to quick infatuation, like a college boy.'[783]

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[779] 'Mondrian, who has just become engaged […] present his fiancée. He is shortly to be married.' Postcard Jan Toorop to Annie Toorop, October 26 1911, as quoted in Welsh, *CR I*, p. 132.
[780] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.
[781] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.
[782] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.
[783] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.

Seuphor's conclusions became, in turn, all that most people knew about Mondrian's nods toward marriage. In fact, the relationship with Heijbroek was hardly a 'quick infatuation.' He had known her for two and a half years before becoming engaged to marry her. Yet something caused him, less than two months after celebrating his marriage plans with his future bride's family and his own friends, and introducing her publically as his fiancée, to break off the engagement.

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Michel Seuphor knew Mondrian for decades, while I was born after Mondrian died. You may well consider Seuphor a surer authority. Seuphor emphasizes how ardently Mondrian was attracted to women, and had his own theory on why the desire failed to lead to any lasting connection. 'Despite his simplicity, they soon found in him something mysterious and impenetrable which turned them away. At times he had a priestly air, something no woman likes. Beneath the surface there was always a major concern which would compromise at nothing.'[784] Seuphor delights in a far-reaching analogy to explain why Mondrian never cemented a relationship: 'Even though, like Baudelaire's albatross, he had "giant wings," he was able to walk, provided he could walk slowly at his customary pace. But those "wings" did scare off other birds."[785]

I see it differently. Reading letters from the Amsterdam years, it is clear that Mondrian did not always scare off women; in fact, quite a number were head over heels in love with him. More than one was eager to marry him. It was Mondrian, not the ladies, who insisted on his staying unattached.

I am convinced that the way Mondrian thought is summed up to perfection in what the character Luzhin says to Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*: 'What came of it was that I tore my caftan in two, shared it with my neighbor, and we were both left half naked, in accordance with the Russian proverb which says: If you chase several hares at once, you won't overtake any of them. But science says: Love yourself before all, because everything in the world is based on self-interest. If you love only yourself, you will set your affairs up properly, and your caftan will remain on one piece. And economic truth adds that the more properly arranged personal affairs and, so to speak, whole caftans there are in society, the firmer its foundations are and the better arranged its common cause. It follows that by acquiring solely and exclusively for myself, I am thereby precisely acquiring for everyone, as it were, and working for that my neighbor will have something more than a torn caftan, not from private, isolated generosities now, but as a result of universal prosperity.'[786]

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[784] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.
[785] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 86.
[786] Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and Punishment*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Vintage Classics, New York 1993, p. 148-149.

And so Piet Mondrian, at the end of the last year before he turned forty, switched course completely. Rather than share his life with one other person, and their future children, he would lead it alone, not out of greed for himself, but to give a form of prosperity to everybody.

PART II

Man is driven; there is no end to what he cannot become. The need to discover and invent, to remake, improve, is essential to him. He must pursue perfection come what may.

David Malouf, *The Happy Life*

Paris 1912-1914

I

On Wednesday, December 20 1911, Mondrian filed documents at the registrar's office in Amsterdam to establish his legal residency outside of the Netherlands.[787]

He went into his usual pre-move mode. Mondrian quickly tried to sell off the small remaining stock of his older pictures. He needed to build up his bank account to pay for travel and to set himself up abroad.[788] He had made urgent contact with Kickert, who was back in Paris; perhaps Kickert could find him a place to live there. It was good to have friends who were richer and better situated than he was. The wealthiest, Simon Maris, paid 130 guilders, the equivalent of 1350 euros today for a substantial group of paintings and drawings.[789] It was the equivalent of a low wholesale price, but Mondrian was delighted. His older art no longer interested him, and he needed to prepare for a stretch of time when he would have limited earning capacity.

Mondrian left more recent paintings with another of his friends, Anna Bruin. Bruin, a pharmacist, who had been living in Amsterdam and recently moved to The Hague, was among those loyal enthusiasts who regularly bought his work. He knew he could count on her at least to take care of these pictures, and possibly to buy or sell them.[790] He turned over the rest of what was unsold to Van den Briel for safekeeping.[791] He did this all with dispatch.

Not longer after he had his name removed from the municipal register in Amsterdam, Mondrian boarded the southbound train for the capital of France, again unattached and with few possessions. The taste he had had of it the previous spring had lingered; he loved both what Paris was and what it was not. He intended never again to return except for brief holidays to the country where his ancestry went back for as long as anyone knew.

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[787] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 100.

[788] In a recent biography of Lodewijk Schelfhout, the author claims that Schelfhout paid for Mondrian's train ticket from Amsterdam to Paris. See L.M. Almering-Strik, *Lodewijk Schelfhout. Nederlands eerste kubist*, Waanders, Zwolle 2018, p. 55.

[789] Gorter, *Mies Maris*, p. 47.

[790] 'When I left for Paris this lady [Miss Bruin] kindly offered to store some large canvases for me, and she has already sold several.' Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29 1914. Joosten, *CR II*, p. 100.

[791] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 168.

Conrad Kickert lived at 33 avenue du Maine. It was a building of artists' studios, in the busy area near the Montparnasse train station and the bustling junction where the rue de Rennes meets the Boulevard du Montparnasse. It is a part of Paris that even back then did not seem particularly Parisian, an area with little personality in its architecture or layout. People came and went at a hectic pace, day and night, grabbing quick, cheap food rather than lingering in cafés; with the train station right there, they were mostly foreigners and visitors from the provinces, everyone bent on a task. But the low-price studios had the advantage of being at the center of town, and Mondrian's friend Lodewijk Schelfhout, at Kickert's suggestion, had already moved into the structure dedicated to artists content to live in the same small quarters where they worked. Kickert had found and taken space for Mondrian in the building, so even though Mondrian had left his homeland geographically, he was welcomed into a small Dutch colony of familiar faces. And he had the confidence of knowing that his fellow artists, admiring his adventurous approach to painting, had taken pains to have him join them.

Schelfhout and Kickert were part of a larger circle of artists, not just Dutch but also French and foreign. Art dealers and critics mingled easily with them. Their unofficial clubhouse was the Café du Dôme. A stylish mix of highly varnished wood and silver plate and red leather reflected in its many mirrors, all brightly lit, the Dôme allowed painters and writers to gather for long animated conversations over a single coffee or beer or pastis. Those of them who had the funds also regularly attended soirées at the Closerie des Lilas, a restaurant frequented especially by writers and painters. The Closerie had a lovely outside area under trellises; in the warmer months ahead, it would be covered with flowers, but even though at the time Mondrian arrived, the vines were bare and one could not sit outside, it was a haven. Mondrian totally enjoyed these cosmopolitan haunts, and with Kickert generously footing the bill, was happy to have the diversions of outings to both while he spent his early days back in the French capital making his space on the Avenue du Maine liveable and workable. He had been at the Dôme and the Closerie the previous June, and relished being back at these bastions of well-being.

Both establishments frequented by Schelfhout and Kickert and Mondrian were on the Boulevard du Montparnasse. The first was scarcely ten minutes on foot from their building, the second a leisurely twenty-minute walk. They would go together, and Kickert and Schelfhout introduced him not just to fellow artists, but also writers and musicians. Mondrian kept a certain distance as always, and became intimate with no one, but the get-togethers with people of like interests fulfilled his frequent need to socialize, and the warm welcome into the world of like-minded souls, following his escape by the skin of his teeth from a life of domestic rectitude in the Netherlands, was enormous comfort.

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Mondrian wrote to Aletta de Iongh about his almost having become a husband. He does not refer to Greta Heijbroek by name; it is almost as if she was a concept more than an individual. It had taken Mondrian only a few weeks in Paris to see the move toward marriage as a fantasy, with him in a dream state that had no reality. He tells his confidante that he had stepped with one foot into a lovely, alluring domain, and then withdrawn it when he woke up to the recognition that the territory he had imagined entering would not work. The deal-breaker was his realization of who he really was. Mondrian understood what had attracted him, and also why he had to retreat.

The episode had been exquisite, but its termination had been essential. 'I expect you heard that I nearly got married last autumn, but fortunately I realized just in time that it was nothing but an illusion, all that sweetness and light. Although I have always lived for my art, the good life also attracts me, which is why I sometimes do things that seem out of character.'[792]

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He was never burdened by anything for too long. He existed to make art; he would not let life's complications get in the way. He informed De Iongh,

'To start with it was all a bit nerve-racking, as you can imagine, what with all the unfamiliarity and new insights and so on. But now I feel just about the same as I did at Sarphatipark in Amsterdam, only my room here is tiny, although the studio is the same size. And it's no more expensive for me here than in Amsterdam, and much more instructive, obviously. It's wonderful, the way you can just be yourself in a big world city like this. I bet you envy me for being here!'[793]

It isn't clear what it was that he expected to inspire jealousy in Aletta de Iongh, except for the freedom not to pretend to be someone other than who one was. Having pulled himself back at the last moment from the precipice of marriage, he was, instead, in the ideal territory of being 'majestically oneself.' In a sophisticated metropolis, Mondrian was not simply liberated by being independent, but married to life itself.

II

In his streamlined existence, Mondrian pushed his art toward the same brutal honesty and effectiveness he had carved out for his way of relating to other human beings. The essential Cubism of Braque and Picasso launched

[792] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, heading '33 Avenue du Maine'] KM 112.577.
[793] Letter Mondrian to Aletta de Iongh, [no date, heading '33 Avenue du Maine'] KM 112.577.

him on a new course.[794] It had toughness and integrity, eschewing all that was decorative in the wish to evoke the raw essence of matter. This is one of those occasions when his friend Michel Seuphor is trenchant, providing the insider's view on what it was that revivified Mondrian as he approached the age of forty: 'Cubism was not only a natural reaction against the excitement of the Fauves ("I love the rule which corrects emotion," Braque said), nor was it merely the systematic application of Cézanne's remark in his famous letter to Emile Bernard ("Treat nature as a cylinder, sphere, and cone"); it was, above all, Paris laid bare, Paris stripped of its trees, of its young women, of any illusion-engendering sunlight, Paris reduced to its essential substance, to its virile essence: the bones and marrow.'[795]

This brave, powerful way of painting was flourishing when Mondrian landed in the French capital. Its impact was a mixed blessing, but ultimately fortuitous. Mondrian would, for the next couple of years, lapse into a degree of imitation that was unusual for him and inspired a rare level of mediocrity in his painting. Yet his willing acceptance of an artistic approach not of his own invention, which he openly acknowledged, permitted him to grow. With the confidence that only a truly committed artist could have, he could afford to be a follower and say as such—because it would be the tool that would lead him on his own way.

Cubism offered Mondrian a new approach to representation that excited him even more than anything else in Paris. He welcomed the dance halls, the masterpieces of the Louvre, and the thrills of a culture based on personal pleasure—in sharp contrast to Calvinism with its perpetual invocation of guilt—but none of this equalled the impact of the revolutionary approach to painting. The art for which the rubric "Cubism" suggested the distillation of matter into geometric form celebrated daily living while having nothing whatsoever to do with private emotion. It explored the issue of presentation and seeing with all-encompassing rigor, but its discipline and control were only a vehicle. Cubism fostered the assuredness to celebrate matter and seeing unabastedly, while leaving the self aside.

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In addition to Braque and Picasso, Gris, Léger, Gleizes, Metzinger, and Villon were first-rate practitioners pushing themselves, each in his own way, in what was, more than a new style, a brave exploration of human vision. Their painting was having an incendiary effect on the world around them. The critic and poet Guillaume Apollinaire extolled its merits in eloquent

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[794] I use the term 'essential Cubism' in imitation of the 1983 Tate Gallery show. That specific exhibition presented a 'narrow view of Cubism in its purest form […] true Cubism – that is to say, the pictorial idiom created by Braque, Picasso, Gris and Léger […]' *The Essential Cubism. Braque, Picasso & their friends 1907-1920* (exhibition catalogue), The Tate Gallery, London 1983, p. 10.

[795] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 93.

language which enabled the larger public to understand it. The German-born art dealer Daniel-Henri Kahnweiler, who had a gallery at 28 rue Vignon, was selling these new Cubist pictures for substantial sums to enlightened collectors from all over Europe and even as far away as America. Mondrian deliberately kept his distance from the inner circle; he chose not to meet Picasso or Braque or any other of the well-known practitioners, even if they might have brushed shoulders at Le Dôme or La Closerie des Lilas, although eventually he would strike up a friendship with Léger. Yet, working quietly in his small studio, the thirty-nine-year-old refugee from the Netherlands let what Seuphor calls 'the need for order which could be sensed behind this effervescence'[796] guide him to make paintings completely unlike what he had done previously.

#

Among all the Cubists, it was Braque and Picasso whose work became a guide to Mondrian. Their geometrizing of form beckoned him, and their animation of the picture surface served as a valuable lead in the direction of the things he cared about. Seuphor, however, insistently positions Mondrian as a victor in a competition with the two pioneers of Cubism. Seuphor write of Mondrian 'carrying to the limit their unexpressed ideas, recording in clear logic the whole teaching of Cubism at the very moment when the greatest cubist painters halted or went backwards.'[797]

A number of other critics and scholars have joined Seuphor in elevating Mondrian above the others, but not all of us agree. And it is unlikely that Mondrian himself had such an inflated view of his initial foray into Cubism. Mondrian made his own version of it, impressively rigorous, but lacking the charm and poetry of the best work by his Parisian confreres or of his own subsequent art.

The switch in the artist's style when he arrived in the French capital was, essentially, a useful detour. Eager to learn and advance, trying new techniques in order to develop his own voice, he was not painting masterpieces. He initially produced some rather murky paintings that, if we came upon them out of context, without knowing in advance who the artist was, we could take to be by a number of second-tier practitioners of Cubism. Their value was mainly as stepping stones in Mondrian's search for order and control.

The anticipation of turning forty often causes people to make a major change in their lives. Experimenting with Cubism, Mondrian was coming closer to the language that would most effectively enable him to express the universal. With his move to Paris, as a committed bachelor, he was reformulating his existence. Inside, he was the same person and the same artist he had always been, ruled by the same passions, but the presentation would be different, and presentation was everything.

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[796] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 94.
[797] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 96.

III

In 1880, the annual Salon des Artistes in Paris had rejected, across the board, every work of art submitted by Paul Cézanne, Paul Gauguin, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Georges Seurat, Odilon Redon, and Paul Signac. Anyone who did not produce art that adhered to the rules of the Academy was sent packing. But these painters who get grouped under the empty but serviceable rubric "Post-Impressionists" had courage and savoir-faire that matched their skill and imagination. In 1883, these intrepid rejects organized a Salon des Refusés, and in little time the "refusés" founded and banded together as the Société des Artistes Indépendants.[798] They announced their policy to hold unjuried exhibitions, which would accept the work of any artist who wished to participate. The policy was unprecedented, and so was the art.

The group's first show was held in the Pavilion Polychrome located between the Seine river and the Champs-Élysées. By today's standards, the caliber of the work was extraordinary. Seurat's *Bathers at Asnières* (1883–84), which had been summarily turned down by the official Salon that same year, was among the masterpieces on view. The quality level remained on that level year after year. By 1905, Henri Rousseau, Pierre Bonnard, Henri Matisse, and the Fauves had all exhibited at this annual show for artists deemed inadequate by the organizers of the official Salon. When the 28th Salon des Indépendants opened on March 19, 1912, Piet Mondrian joined the list of distinguished artists shown by the rebel organization.

Although he had not yet been in Paris for three whole months, that exhibition instantly made Mondrian a major figure in the world of the Parisian avant-garde. Guillaume Apollinaire wrote in the newspaper *L'Intransigeant* that Gallery XX, which had three of Mondrian's latest oil paintings in it, was 'perhaps the most important gallery of the salon.'[799] Mondrian's paintings were in the company of major work by Gleizes, Le Fauconnier, Léger, and Metzinger; Mondrian and Léger were the stars of the group, and Apollinaire's declaration had incalculable weight in a small circle of admirers.

The exhibition catalogue states the artist's name as 'Pierre Mondrian.' He used classic French titles for his pictures: 'Dans le Jardin,' 'Dans la Forêt,' and 'La Fruitière.'[800] *The Fruit Seller* could well be the same canvas which later became known as *Large Nude*.[801] The reason it could eventually

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[798] Official establishment of the Société des Artistes Indépendants took place on June 11 1884.

[799] *L'Intransigeant,* April 3, 1912 as quoted from Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 169.

[800] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 26.

[801] B7 *"The Large Nude"* 1912, oil on canvas, 140 x 98 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

be given a new title so different from its original one is that the painting style was so deliberately non-specific in its representation of a moment in everyday life that what could be read as a fruit seller's white apron could just as easily be seen as bare flesh. The central figure—it is unclear whether it is a woman or a man—is vaporous, as if emerging like smoke from the stone-colored solid structure that has more reality than she or he does.[802] This person is weightless; to be human is to be temporal, more spiritual than physical.

The metamorphosis of Mondrian's approach to the human figure was analogous to his own. A few months earlier, he had publicly announced his intention to live as a married man, on a life course where, although a professional painter, he would fit in with the Dutch bourgeoisie. Now he had become, at least emotionally, celibate. Rather than turning into a family man with all of its responsibilities, he had opted for an ascetic way of life with minimal everyday needs, enabling him to purify seeing and distill art, without personal distractions or obligations. *The Fruit Seller-Large Nude* reflects Mondrian's deliberate renouncing of earthbound physicality and his move toward what was universal and spiritual, in his life and his art.

To achieve his objectives, Mondrian had made a concerted effort to follow the principles of Cubism. The carefully constructed composition approached the subject from multiple positions simultaneously, and minimized color. It lacks, however, the animation of a Braque or the panache of a Picasso. The geometric division of the face seems more arbitrary than organic. The rendition of the person's body is stilted and devoid of sensuousness; he or she could be a military officer standing at attention, or a ghost. The main problem is that the painting, overall, is limp. The important French critic André Salmon was not being entirely unfair when, in *Paris Journal,* he wrote, after describing Gallery 20 as the 'royaume des Cubistes,' 'Mondrian fait du cubisme à l'aveuglette, dans l'ignorance complète de la loi des volumes, et son inspiration vient de Van Dongen!'[803] Salmon saw Mondrian and some of the other recent converts to Cubism as setting back a worthy cause: 'Such newcomers, alas! will drive public opinion to distraction, will lead it astray for a long time.'[804]

The canvas was, however, an earnest attempt to go further toward generalized, non-specific subject matter. And when Mondrian avoided the human figure—a subject with which he had never been at ease—his forays into Cubism were more vivacious. During his first spring in Paris, he made

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[802] Hans Janssen writes that the only things that reminds of a female figure is the small mouth, the curve of the chin and the wide open eyes staring outwards. The body itself is aligned with the brush strokes. Janssen, *Mondriaan in het Gemeentemuseum*, p. 163.

[803] André Salmon, 'Le Salon des Indépendants,' *Paris Journal* March 20 1912, as quoted in Léal*, Mondrian*, p. 278.

[804] André Salmon, 'Le Salon des Indépendants,' *Paris* Journal March 20 1912, as quoted in Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 169.

several still lifes and paintings of trees. More relaxed with leaves and branches and fruit and serving objects than with women or men as his subject matter, he became warm and lyrical, enlivened the surface, and gracefully infused the pictures with a delightful range of soft colors.

#

By the time he completed these paintings, Mondrian had moved to the studio where we found him at the start of this book. On May 11, he registered at 26 rue du Départ. This block of studio-residences was across the street from 33 avenue du Maine. It had been constructed only a couple of years earlier to replace the first structure, which was now being torn down to accommodate the expansion of the Montparnasse train station. Kickert and Schelfhout made the identical move. Kickert's place was on the same staircase as Mondrian's, one floor below.[805] The Mexican painter Diego Rivera, who had arrived in France in 1909, settled in with his girlfriend Angeline Beloff next to Mondrian's studio on the top floor.[806] The inhabitants of the new building had very different approaches to making art, but they were all dedicated to it as their life's purpose.

When Mondrian presented himself at the headquarters of the Préfecture de Police and in the immigration office on that balmy Saturday in 1912, it did not occur to him that his new residential studio on the rue du Départ would become one of the most photographed and written about spaces of the twentieth century. He just did what he believed in and liked; he did not dream of fame or glory. He had no idea that the unique mix of austerity and liveliness in the environment he would create for both living and working, would make such a mark on the world. Nor did he imagine that the spectacular colors and movement of the paintings he would make there, would cause him eventually be the best known artist of the compound. Mondrian entertained no thought of grandeur; he did not imagine stature or fortune. He had the sort of imagination that would enable him to be utterly original, but he never congratulated himself or took pride in his role as a pioneer. He considered only how he would paint, and how he would live in order to do so.

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Once he had settled into his new studio, Mondrian presented his credentials at the Louvre and filled out the requisite paperwork so that he would be allowed to set up his easel and makes copies there. On June 1, having received a permit that was valid for the year 1912, he began to copy the *Avignon Pietà. During her visit to Paris that Spring,* Marie Tak van Poortvliet—a serious collector of modern art who lived in The Hague and who had a relationship with the painter Jacoba van Heemskerck—had commissioned

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[805] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 170.

[806] At first Diego Rivera had lived in the artist's residence La Ruche, see Olivier Renault, *Montparnasse, les lieux de legende, Ateliers, cafés mystiques, académies, cité d'artistes,* Parigramme, Paris 2013, p. 185.

Mondrian to reproduce this fifteenth-century masterpiece which the art historian Elie Faure credits to Enguerrand Quarton but which the Louvre simply identifies by the name of the French hill town where it was painted.[807] Its powerfull composition, vivid colors, and the emotional force of the Virgin mourning the dead Jesus made the task of copying it a fantastic learning lesson. Several times a week, Mondrian would descend the rickety stairs on the rue du Départ, board one of the new autobuses that had been put into service the previous year to replace horse-drawn omnibuses, and take it from Montparnasse to the Seine and over the river to the Louvre. After setting up his portable easel and paints and brushes, he would work away. Mondrian made the copy only to earn money so that he could paint on his own terms and experiment with the Cubist idiom, but this particular panel gave him the chance to observe an early triumph of exactitude and precision of construction and color deployment. The recumbent Christ creates a powerful horizontal form which is answered crisply by the vertical of his falling arm, while the intense and luminous hues infuse the moving scenario with vibrancy. This is a painter's painting; a decade later, the young Balthazar Klossowski, who would be known as "Balthus," set up his easel in the same place, and even if what affected Balthus the most was the inertness and total lassitude of the dead Christ, and the religiosity of the scene, what was moving to all of the many twentieth-century artists who copied this Pietà was the authority and richness with which it was painted. Working diligently on his version of the fifthteen-century panel, Mondrian increased his knowledge of visual rhythm and counterpoint. At the same time, he was engaged with an art work of ineffable spirituality. The conjoining of physical movement in the here and now with some overriding, timeless, universal force had a lifelong impact on him.

But he had to move quickly. It was essential for Mondrian to finish the task for Miss Tak van Poortvliet as soon as possible. He had been asked to show his own recent work in exhibitions in Cologne and Nijmegen, and felt excited about the direction his art had taken since his arrival in Paris, but nothing was selling. He desperately needed the payment that would come to him once he delivered the copy. Only when he had the means to pay his rent and cover his living expenses would he have the time to produce work for the two shows.

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He finished the copy in early summer. It gave him the funds not just to paint, but also to go back to the Netherlands for a holiday. Taking the train from Paris on Sunday July 21, he went straight to his father in Arnhem and stayed there with him for ten days, until the end of the month.[808] One

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[807] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 101; Hans Janssen, *Mondrian and cubism. Parijs 1912-1914*, Ridinghouse, London 2016, p. 24.

[808] Postcards from Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, July 5 1912; July 19 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 3-4. Cf. Joosten, *CR II*, p. 101.

imagines Pieter Mondriaan slightly gruff, but mellowed; the father and son holding forth at length with strong views, the older one prevailing. Maybe, however, they sat there in silence. I long to know more about what went on inside the house in that small Dutch city: what the furniture was, what the place smelled like, how present Piet's sister was. I assume that the two Pieter Mondriaans did not exchange intimacies, but, while formal with each other, were cordial. But in fact there is only one certainty about that visit in the summer of 1912, and it is at complete odds with the impression of all previous writing that touched on Mondriaan father and son: which is that Mondrian made the time with his father his first priority when he returned to the Netherlands, and stayed ten days.

From Arnhem, Mondrian went back to Domburg. He stayed in the beach resort for nearly two weeks; Jacoba van Heemskerck had lent him her studio there.[809] Van Heemskerck was an independent personality who had moved to Paris as a professional artist in 1901 and who had, for a number of years, divided her time between there and the Netherlands. She and another woman, Marie Tak van Poortvliet, were lovers. Van Poortvliet, who was wealthy, built a house in Domburg (Villa Loverendale) with a studio for Van Heemskerck; the two lived there in the summer, and in The Hague in the winters. Mondrian gave art lessons to Van Heemskerck in 1909, and subsequently included her work in exhibitions he organized, to the annoyance of Sluijters, who did not share Mondrian's esteem for her work, which strongly reflected Mondrian's own.[810]

During that brief return to the seaside, Mondrian made a leap in his painting. On previous summers he had captured the same dunes and ocean, and trees through relatively straightforward representational painting. Now he constructed compositions where the subject was nearly gone. One senses a choppy sea or a canopy of trees in full leaf, but, above all, they exist as flat vertical planes. We apprehend the subject matter, but in paintings that are like walls covered with abstract forms.

The Sea, a close-up of the surface of the water, is a solid plane against which we feel ourselves pressed (Fig. 31).[811] It has neither foreground nor sky. There is no distant space, no looking beyond. Likewise, in *Landscape*, also painted in those two weeks in Domburg, everything is pushed to the foreground.[812] Even though this painting depicts trees, it is primarily a Cubist abstraction, predominantly the color of stone. The ample foliage is a barrier as fixed as the backdrop of a theatre set, blocking out anything behind it. The surface of the painting is what counts: full stop.

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[809] Janssen, *Path to Abstraction,* p. 170.
[810] A.H. Huussen jr., J.F.A. van Paaschen-Louwerse, *Jacoba van Heemskerck van Beest 1876-1923. Schilderes uit roeping*, Waanders, Zwolle 2005, p. 25-35.
[811] B17 *"The Sea"* 1912, oil on canvas, 82,5 x 92 cm, Private collection.
[812] B16 *"Paysage"* 1912, oil on canvas, 63 x 78 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

Fig. 31. Mondrian, *"The Sea"*, 1912

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From Domburg, Mondrian went on to Amsterdam. There he took place in the selection committee of the Moderne Kunstkring exhibition, scheduled to open at the Stedelijk on October 6. Initially, the show was to have Gauguin as its central figure, but Mondrian and Kickert also had other ideas. They were determined to have the focus be the more recent art they had discovered abroad. The exhibition ended up featuring, among other things, six Braques, seven Derains, four Herbins, eight Léger oils and six of his watercolors, twelve major Picassos and thirty three works by Le Fauconnier.[813]

Regarded with sufficient respect by his fellow Kunstkring committee members that he succeeded in persuading them to take a brave and pioneering course in exhibiting these major Cubist paintings that most people regarded at best as puzzling experiments, decades before their current status was conferred on them, Mondrian advanced his cause of a new approach to art. He had not even been in Paris for a full year, but he wanted to open the eyes of the Dutch public to this unprecedented, and intrinsically difficult, artistic appraoch. It was not, however, because he loved it personally. It was more out of respect for its courage, and his own fondness for revolution. In 1917, Mondrian would write his new friend Theo van Doesburg, with whom he was developing an even more radical artistic style, a letter that tracks his own feelings back in 1912, and in it we see not only Mondrian's own true taste, but the consuming importance the

[813] For a more detailed description of (the realization of) the exhibition, see Van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst*, p. 41-51.

art of painting, and people's visual agenda, had for him: '[…] And now about our Paris colleagues. I for myself remain to the opinion that they are not on the right path, but that we are further. Severini now writes so clear that they want to represent "les objects, les corps – that's exactly the point. We only want to represent what these objects express – proportion -- . Let them judge it as too abstract and let them do what they want to do. Already in Paris I felt a difference and therefore avoided even Picasso. Severini was by then still a Futurist, I think I have met him once, but I am sure they know me via Riviera and Zaraga (Severini quotes him in his essay) Riviera had a studio in the same building where I lived and followed with great attention my work. He was sill a pointilist when I met him; Zaraga still made figures when I left Paris. There were Russians also: a whole intellectual-artist circle: nice people, but – I thought – no great artists. So I also think the latest reproduction of Severini in De Stijl is actually a weak imitation Picasso, with things of Metzinger in it. I thought that Léger was, after Picasso and Braque, the best: if you could get a reproduction of him for De Stijl you would like that, I guess. He was the most abstract but in the round line: yet strong. Metzinger was something also: Gleizes however was not, although he belonged to them also. Le Fauconnier joined for a while, but soon went another way. The Cubist called him an "academic" and he was hated for his intrigues. […] Yet it seems to me good to keep the connection with the French, because it is a stage before what we do. Maybe they will understand it later.'[814]

IV

Mondrian orchestrated the Kunstkring show, but he had no intention of staying around to work out the details, even if he planned to return to Amsterdam to see it. His life was now in Paris. By Sunday August 26th, he was back painting on the rue du Départ. He wrote Conrad Kickert and his wife Mary that he was "hard at work"[815] and supremely content to be in his studio again. He was happy enough with what he had painted in Domburg, but he was done with wanting to look at dunes. Mondrian had no regrets about not having lingered for a summer beach holiday. Vacations were anathema, any diversion from work torture. Besides, in Paris there was a canvas that he had started before leaving and crying for his return.

It was a second version of the *Ginger Pot.*[816] Mondrian wrote the Kickerts about it as if the progress of his art was a phenomenon of which he was

[814] Letter Mondrian to Theo van Doesburg, December 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.
[815] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.
[816] B18 *Still Life with Gingerpot 2* 1912, oil on canvas, 91,5 x 120 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

simply the agent, 'The still-life is turning out quite well (I think).'[817] Mondrian regarded himself as a vehicle for bringing art into the world; serving a higher purpose, he was like a diligent soldier willing to risk life and limb for his country. With this second *Ginger Pot*, he was re-thinking methods of artistic representation, being guided by some force outside of himself into new and unfamiliar territory. All he could do was to take painstaking care to perform as well as possible. One moment he was certain that he was going in the right direction; the next, he lost all self-assurance.

He intended for *Ginger Pot 2* to be the work where he realized his new goals (Fig. 32). Before getting to it, however, he finished *The Sea*. It proved more tough and demanding when he saw it back in the studio than it had been when he was creating it in Domburg. The waves that roll dramatically are seen as if through the zoom lens of a camera. It is not unlike the images of cellular life greatly enlarged that Mondrian had drawn when recording what Dr. van Calcar saw through a microscope; the focus and framing have a mysterious effect. The detail of the ocean recedes into the distance, but, because of the startling absence of surrounding space, the canvas presents something that is totally *other*. The surface of the roaring sea is an impenetrable plane, like a solid wall. At the same time, the water, moving non-stop, with all of the mysterious qualities innate to that mixture of hydrogen and oxygen, suggests infinity.

Fig. 32. Mondrian, *Still Life with Gingerpot 2*, 1912

Mondrian knew that he had little chance of selling this unusual painting. Nothing would make him stop pushing his art in new directions, but he had a keen awareness of the realities of the marketplace. He disparaged most collectors; given their lack of courage, and their inability to discern the best,

[817] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.

and believed that, they could be counted on if given the chance to choose between what was prosaic and what was more original and profound, they would pick the former. Miss Bine de Sitter, an acquaintance Mondrian had come to know in Zeeland through mutual friends, had been deliberating between his painting of a tree and the one of the sea. After having 'the good news' that she had bought the tree, he quipped to the Kickerts, 'That argues for the sea—n'est-ce pas?'[818]

The Sea was distinguished in being too challenging for the ordinary collector, while *The Tree* was second rate because it found a client. 'For just a little more money they could have had a thing of good quality. The tree isn't bad, but it's much weaker.'[819]

Mondrian's art was getting stronger. He knew that without any doubt, and knew with equal certainty that the general public could not possibly advance at the same rate. 'Ah well – perhaps I will sell the sea in ten years' time, because right now I'm selling the tree done in last year's way, and as sales are proportionately slower, I reckon ten years for the just-made sea. Buyers (nearly) always lag behind in their appreciation.'[820]

He was, as always, matter-of-fact about the realities of ordinary human conduct. Mondrian applied an internal mechanism that prevented him from becoming unbalanced by expectations of things being other than the way they were.

Mondrian was so preoccupied with art itself that, when he wrote about 'trees and the sea,' he did not make any distinction between his *paintings* of them and the actual subjects in nature. The primary function of trees and oceans for Mondrian was as material for him to paint. He was, equally, so obsessed with his own artistic battle that he assumed that his own successes and failures counted as much to others as to him. He expected the Kickerts to be deeply concerned about how he was doing—he had reason to think they would want to know, given their support of him at the time, and informed them in detail about his art and sales with utmost urgency. Without being arrogant, Mondrian felt that he was the single painter of the time who fit the description of Schuré's great initiators. No one else was endowed with the same mastery. He did not come out and say it, and neither did they, but everyone in the circle of Dutch modernists in those years knew that Mondrian was in a league of his own.

#

Mondrian was invariably blunt; falseness of any sort did not occur to him. Just as he did not mince words about the people who bought his art, he offered candid criticism of a recent canvas by Kickert. The sky and the tree were, he wrote the artist, 'really modern,' but as for the figures, he could not

[818] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.
[819] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.
[820] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.

be 'so sure the same applies to the figures, to be honest, but it is up to you to do as you see fit, of course.'[821]

Mondrian was not about to shilly-shally. His artistic standards mattered far more than the effect of his words, and even as he gave lip service to the idea that Kickert above all else should follow his own course, he was bluntly urging his friend and supporter to do better. The tenacity with which he stuck to his views and voiced his opinions, about Kickert's painting as about Picasso's work, was part of his overall faith—in his beliefs and in himself.

V

Mondrian returned to Amsterdam for the Kunstkring exhibition opening on October 6. He had seven works in the show, making his representation equal to that of Braque, Léger, and Derain. Among them was *Still Life with Gingerpot 2,* which he had finished after completing *The Sea*. He had painted intensely throughout September in order to get them done and transported in time.

When he had made *Still Life with Gingerpot 1*, in Amsterdam, in 1911, he had not yet fully abandoned an old-fashioned approach to still-life painting.[822] It was an updated, modernized interpretation of tradition, but anchored in the tried and true method of rendering a group of everyday domestic objects. *Gingerpot 2*, on the other hand, is a full-fledged Cubist composition (Fig. 32). Line, color, and the texture of brushstrokes all count more than the subject matter. There is still a slight naturalistic element, but the representation of the subject had become incidental. Rationalism and order were now crucial.

He was encouraged that at least three of his paintings were sold out of the Kunstkring show. Even if he no longer wanted to live in the Netherlands, his native country was proving hospitable not just to the Parisian modernism he and Kickert had imported, but to his own personal form of Cubism. The Dutch public, now more than before, admired his work. Not only did his new way of painting have a coterie among other artists, but it was paying off financially with the collectors. He had always had a certain self-assuredness, regardless of his popularity or its lack; now he became was downright confident.

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On that return trip to the Kunstkring opening, Mondrian was treated as an important personage in avant-garde circles in Amsterdam. When he was invited to someone's house for dinner, he was invariably the guest of honor.

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[821] Letter Mondrian to Kickert, August 26 1912, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 49.

[822] B2 *Still Life with Gingerpot 1* 1911, oil on canvas, 65,5 x 75 cm, Gemeentemuseum (since 1976 on loan to The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York).

A lady named Catharina Hannaert, known as "To" or "Katinka", three years Mondrian's senior and a friend of Greta Heijbroek's parents, had met Mondrian in Amsterdam or during one of his visits to Laren.[823] She too had a country house in this small village. At the time of the Kunstkring show, she had recently returned to the Netherlands from Berlin, when she had gone to study voice and recuperate from the recent failure of a long marriage. Hannaert was a woman of means, but she had chosen to live in a modest pension as part of her new life in the German capital. In that inexpensive rooming house, she had met a young pianist and composer, Jakob van Domselaer, from the Dutch city of Nijkerk. They became friends, and often went to concerts together.[824]

Van Domselaer was as interested in exploring new ways of making music as Mondrian was in developing a new form of painting. Now that Hannaert and the composer had both moved back to Amsterdam and he had told her that he would be visiting Paris that winter, she became adamant that he meet Mondrian. Van Domselaer was eighteen years younger than Mondrian, and Hannaert was eager to help the sympathetic and creative young man. When she learned that Mondrian was in Amsterdam for his brief visit from Paris to see the Kunstkring show that October, she organized a dinner to which she invited the artist and composer.

We know about the event from the woman Jakob van Domselaer later married. Forty-seven years afterwards, she recounted pertinent details about Mondrian's idiosyncratic conduct that night in 1912. In 1959, following Van Domselaer's death, his widow, Maaike, wrote about this history. In the course of her reminiscences, she provided one of the sharpest portraits on record of Mondrian in that period when he had started his new life in France.

Van Domselaer's widow describes that evening organized by Hannaert. After Mondrian and the composer arrived at Hannaert's house, the conversation started awkwardly. The dialogues were stilted and the silences long. Since Mondrian was both eminent and a generation older, Van Domselaer felt that he could not continue to take the lead once his initial questions had met with unpleasant staccato responses. Then, when Hannaert tried to steer the discussion, Mondrian went from being uncommunicative to petulant.

The hostess persisted, however. In spite of the antipathy Mondrian projected to the younger man, she remained convinced of the potential friendship between the painter and musician with such similar interests. She considered them equally unusual and brilliant intellectually, even if the

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[823] Her official maiden name was Hannaart, but she herself wrote Hannaert. See Martijn F. Le Coultre, *De hut van Mondriaan. Laren-Blaricum 1914-1919*, VK Projects, Naarden 2015, p. 18. In his correspondence to others, Mondrian refers to her as Mrs. (Katinka) Hannaert, so I choose to keep it that way.

[824] Van Domselaer, *Herinneringen*, p. 269.

young composer was clearly more easy-going than the curmudgeonly Mondrian. Hannaert needed to go see someone on the Keizersgracht—the street of fine townhouses where Mondrian had painted a ceiling decoration years earlier. She coerced Mondrian and Van Domselaer to accompany her, and to wait outside alongside the lovely canal while she visited her acquaintance. Hannaert assumed that, standing there, the two would have no choice but to begin speaking with one another.

The scheme failed. 'And so Mondrian and J. continued to walk back and forth along a quiet dark canal, neither of them saying anything. The visit lasted quite a long time... not a word was spoken.'[825]

Mondrian's indifference to usual social conduct, and his conspicuous lack of effort to put a younger and agreeable person at ease, was of a level neither Van Domselaer nor Hannaert ever imagined. Van Domselaer decided afterwards that he would abandon his plan to drop Mondrian a line about his intention to be in Paris, and to give up on the notion that the artist might help him once he was there.

Once Mondrian was back in Paris following the Kunstkring opening, Van Domselaer first hesitated but wrote him with precise details concerning his scheduled arrival there. A few weeks later, in the late afternoon on the given day, the young composer got off the train at the Gare du Nord, and walked to the end of platform. There was Mondrian. Van Domselaer was astonished when Mondrian first greeted him warmly, as if they were old and dear friends, and then told Van Domselaer that he had rented a room for him on the rue Jacob. Mondrian accompanied Van Domselaer to that quiet street in the Latin Quarter, near to the church of St. Germain des Prés. After showing Van Domselaer the place where he would end up living throughout the winter, Mondrian proposed that they go off for dinner. All evening long, Mondrian was convivial to a fault, and each got home at 2 a.m.[826]

#

For the next several years, Mondrian and this man nearly twenty years his junior saw a great deal of one another. It was different from Mondrian's friendship with Van den Briel, who had been an acolyte. Mondrian admired Van Domselaer's innate creative gift and his passion for new approaches to music. He respected the composer as an inventive genious.

Van Domselaer had the tact necessary for having a friendship with Mondrian. His reticence on that first evening in the Netherlands, his ability to keep the silence rather than babble as most people do under such circumstances, had garnered Mondrian's admiration—it was as if he had passed a test. In Paris, Van Domselaer understood Mondrian's need to retreat and have privacy. It took Van Domselaer half an hour on foot, or fifteen minutes, by bus or on the new Metro, to get from the rue Jacob to the rue du Départ, and while he frequently visited Mondrian in his studio or

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[825] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 270.
[826] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 270.

met him in a café or restaurant, he recognized how proscribed the encounters had to be, and never intruded. Mondrian required even more isolation than he had previously. 'Solitude was vital for Mondrian […] to be unexpectedly disturbed was extremely disagreeable for him, and he never failed to comment on it, and everyone was afraid of him because of that.'[827] Maaike van Domselaer tells us this, with the vital detail that it did not bother Mondrian that he imposed such fear. Mondrian had no doubt of the priority of his art, and did not disguise that nothing else was remotely as significant to him. Van Domselaer admired that obsession and the indifference to social norms that went with it. He was heartened to be treated in some ways as an intellectual equal, but, above all, the composer's knowledge of how to navigate their friendship, his tolerance of the rules, and his understanding of Mondrian's preoccupation, are what made it work.

#

Even before she married Van Domselaer in 1916, Maaike Middelkoop would herself come to know Mondrian quite well. She observed that when he was displeased, he would simply withdraw. He would turn silent, even visibly glum, but he never vented anger, or gave the reason for his remoteness.

Of Mondrian's coldness and off-putting comportment during that painful initial meeting with her husband, she posited that 'it may have been that he was put off that evening by the Dutch atmosphere, which he was trying to escape anyway.'[828]

Middelkoop was referring to his having fled the engagement with Greta Heijbroek. It was not just the marriage he had rejected. In moving to Paris, he had deliberately escaped the world of bourgeois dining rooms and the circles of people who all knew one another. The milieu of upper middle class Amsterdam and Laren was like a small town, and gave him claustrophobia. If he did not like something, he simply had nothing to do with it.

VI

Like his latest paintings, Mondrian's way of life depended on overall order and did not allow for whim. He was as disciplined and controlled in his daily routine as in his application of paint to canvas, each element calculated with an eye toward balance.

With his need for social interaction at chosen intervals, he projected the same image in Paris as when he positioned himself on the side of the group photographs in Simon Maris's studio. He lived like a block of color in one

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[827] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 271, as translated in Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 180.
[828] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 270.

of his late compositions: boldly present while simultaneously encased and isolated. He resembled one of his undiluted blue rectangles: functioning in precise relation to what he chose to have nearby, secured by the boundaries carefully circumscribed around him. He would engage with others only when he could maintain his autonomy. He needed to be sociable, but his aloneness the rest of the time was inviolate. He loathed intrusions at home, where work was sacrosanct. Maybe in the privacy of his solitude, he was given to rage, or fluctuated wildly between euphoria and despair, but, if so, it was unknown to others. In public, at least, he never revealed vulnerability.

To an unusual extent, Mondrian have the impression that the unexpected did not flap him. His system was supple rather than rigid, and allowed for surprises, whether a visitor who arrived unscheduled, or a world war that required his total displacement. When someone arrived unscheduled at the rue du Départ, Mondrian was infallibly polite. Even if it was the sort of interruption he did his best to discourage, his wish for balance meant that he did not let himself get upset. He was calm and gracious. He could on occasion be conspicuously awkward—today it might be identified as symptomatic of Asperger's syndrome—as during that evening organized by Miss Hannaert in Amsterdam, and, several years later, with what we would call a nonstandard style of flirting with Maaike Middelkoop, but he always kept his cool. Several journalists or friends would describe catching him unawares, and he remained well-mannered. As with the surprise appearance of the scandal monger in Brabant, the man declaring to the locals that in Amsterdam he and Mondrian had been homosexual lovers, Mondrian maintained as calm a veneer as possible. His most urgent need was to disassociate himself from problems and emotional disturbances.

Serious as he always was in photos, if he was with people who made him comfortable, under conditions of his own choosing, Mondrian was open to having fun. Van Domselaer was an ideal companion when the artist was in the mood for company. That first year in Paris, Mondrian spent almost as many evenings with the young composer as he had with Albert van den Briel when they lived near one another in Brabant. The age difference with Van Domselaer was the same as with Van den Briel, and it suited him to be with someone a generation younger.

Mondrian and Van Domselaer had a routine. At the end of his long workday, like someone closing up shop, the artist would regularly clean his brushes and cap his paint tubes. He would head out from the studio on the rue du Départ and meet Van Domselaer at a 'Bouillon.' In these traditional brasseries with ornate Art Nouveau wainscoting and marble mosaics, amidst the happy visual clutter of colorful stained glass and shimmering mirrors, the two men quaffed Belgian beer and ate staples like pork cheeks with mashed potatoes and lamb shoulder that had been cooked for seven hours. As with Van den Briel, on weekends they saw one another not just in the evenings, but also during the day. Mondrian and Van Domselaer developed

a Sunday ritual of taking long walks together, and then, in the evenings, visiting the artists Peter Alma or Otto van Rees. Monday mornings, Mondrian invariably resumed his weekday schedule of painting without interruption.[829]

#

Van Domselaer experienced this gregarious side of Mondrian, but most other people did not. Except for the rare occasions when he was with the few individuals whom he trusted totally, Mondrian maintained a careful distance and was subtly aloof. Paradoxically, he could be counted on as someone who would go out of his way not just for his friends, but for his friends' friends. An acquaintance in Amsterdam, a man Mondrian hardly knew, sent him a letter saying that his son had taken a job to be a waiter in Nice.The son was going to be taking the train to Paris, arriving at the Gare du Nord, and then switching to the Gare de Lyon in order to head south. Mondrian was annoyed by the implicit request to turn his life upside down for someone he had not even met. He complained to Van Domselaer. He was miffed because the Amsterdam acquaintance had not frankly stated what he wanted; he merely provided the travel information.

The future waiter was traveling from the Netherlands on a night train which would arrive in Paris at about 5 a.m. On his way to dinner with Van Domselaer the night before, Mondrian became undisguisedly grouchy. The irritation was rare for him, but when he felt tense and anti-social, he let you know it. He grumbled that he intended to rush home right after dinner because he needed to get up at such an ungodly hour to go to the Gare du Nord.

Mondrian had decided he had no choice. Whatever his underlying motivation, he had been constitutionally incapable of turning down the request to greet and help the young man. Maybe he was curious, seeking his own adventure. Maybe he had a code of behaviour he deemed imperative. He had gone to the Gare du Nord much the same way to greet Van Domselaer months earlier, even if this time his plan was simply to shepherd someone he had never met before—also a young man—from one train station to another. In any case, as he explained to Van Domselaer, they had to make it an early evening so that he could get to the station before dawn. 'Well, you see, it was something I promised to do, but I am so afraid that I will oversleep.'[830]

Van Domselaer anticipated a hasty, unpleasant dinner. Then the aperitif and food and wine got into Mondrian's system. His mood changed completely. By the end of the meal, Van Domselaer suggested that they simply forget the idea of going to sleep. Mondrian embraced the new plan enthusiastically.

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[829] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 271.
[830] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 271.

Mondrian and Van Domselaer lingered in the restaurant until it closed, and then went to a night café until it closed. It was 3 a.m. They simply stood for a while on the quiet sidewalk in front of the shut café, and then they walked through empty streets toward the Gare du Nord.

As they made their way through the seedy neighborhood between the Gare de l'Est and the Gare du Nord, passing dark shop fronts and the occasional beggar, Mondrian and Van Domselaer became too tired even to speak. But if Mondrian was again almost completely silent as he had at their first encounter with Miss Hannaert, this time he was visibly in wonderful spirits. By the time Mondrian and Van Domselaer reached the Gare du Nord, it was raining steadily, but Mondrian did not mind in the least. The doors to the station would only open when the train from Amsterdam, the first of the morning arrived. Mondrian and Van Domselaer, still silent, stood outside, positioning themselves against a wall to keep as dry as possible. Finally, just before the train came in, the station opened. Van Domselaer went home, at Mondrian's request, leaving the artist on his own. The young man arrived, and Mondrian, holding a sign with the name of this person he had never met, welcomed him warmly at the gate. He took the aspiring waiter to the Gare de Lyon, gave him a good breakfast, and saw him off on his journey to Nice.

#

The forty-year-old Mondrian and twenty-two-year-old Van Domselaer decided to take French lessons together. They found a Parisian woman to teach them. The demanding instructress had rarely encountered pupils as hard-working and diligent with their assignments, and both men made rapid strides. At the end of the year, the teacher decided that each was ready to write a long essay on a topic of his choice. Mondrian picked Christmas as his subject.

The story he invented in the language he was in the process of learning provides a rare window to Mondrian's mind at this moment when he was setting into his new life. Before starting to read it out loud to his teacher and fellow student, he announced 'that the romantic notion of a white Christmas was over and done with, and that it was time for something completely different.'[831]

He was dead earnest about his thesis. In the voice of someone reciting an esoteric poem, Mondrian then began to read his text. His French syntax was correct even if his Dutch accent remained strong. 'No snow-covered fields,' he declared. Van Domselaer, who recounted the recital to his wife who in turn was the source of the story, could remember no specific words beyond Mondrian's preamble and that opening line, however. All he could recall is that Mondrian continued piously about his yearning for whiteness and purity. Van Domselaer found Mondrian so painfully full of his own virtue that he struggled not burst out laughing. Elaborating his thoughts in

[831] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 272.

terms that were remarkably pretentious given how limited his French vocabulary was, Mondrian spoke with the incantations of a schoolchild uttering the most truthful sentences ever written. Finally, Van Domselaer had to force himself not to listen; it was the only way not to explode in guffaws.

Mondrian was not, he had made clear, nostalgic for old-fashioned Dutch Christmases. What he voiced in his cloying delivery was his determination to see the qualities of snow, intrinsic to the more spiritual and artistic traditions of the holiday, supplant the materialism and commercialism he found objectionable in the current celebration of Christmas. In that same mode, he and Van Domselaer attended Midnight Mass at Notre Dame. The middle-aged painter and young musician fell into a rapt state as they sat on a pew surrounded by the crowd of devotees packed into Paris's great Gothic cathedral in advance of the chiming of the clock for the first moment of Christmas day. Humbled by the soaring space, and moved by the rich organ music of Bach and Händel, these two emigrees from Protestant Netherlands happily succumbed to Catholic ritual. It was not just the architecture and music and adherence to ceremony that enchanted Mondrian. In his own very particular way, he believed, more and more, in some form of holy force. And he was attracted by the vivid passion of the celebration, so different from the restraint of Calvinist rites.

For his art to meet his goals, it had to be possessed of that universal, omniscient power of the God being worshipped at Notre Dame. The commitment and adulation apparent in painting had to be nothing less than in Bach's cantatas and the most glorious stained glass.

VII

Composition Trees 2 was a breakthrough.[832] It was a painting Mondrian made in 1912, well after he was settled in Paris and spent ample time studying Cubism. It took the effect of the French Cubists to change Mondrian. What he did late in 1912 is, remarkable, and what makes it sing are its pure, straight dashes. They serve as the constituent elements of trees—with the short and choppy vertical, horizontal, and diagonal lines assembling themselves before our eyes as trunks, branches, and foliage—but in their straightness and decisiveness, these well-measured (in thickness as in length) units have a power that is all their own, not because of what they represent but what they are.

Composition Trees 2 is a leap in the progression that had began two decades earlier with *In the Forest.* In the intervening twenty years, Mondrian had made countless pictures of tree trunks and branches. *Woods near Oele* was a high

[832] B24 *Composition Trees 2* 1912-13, oil on canvas, 98 x 65 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

point. In this latest rendition of the forest, however, Mondrian made the foliage devoid of color other than the most muted grays, blacks, and browns—a byproduct of his seeing works in that palette by Picasso and Braque. Rather than a portrayal of nature in which, however untraditional the means (as in the wild colors and frenzied brushwork of *The Red Cloud*), the subject, and the wish to represent its essence, governed, Mondrian had been lead, via Cubism, to a radical breakthrough. Now the artistry—the stacks of undisguised brush strokes—has been elevated from its role as the means to being the essence of the painting.

Having consciously moved from the familiar world and entered a realm that is more like that of music, Mondrian had a new vigor and assuredness. This nearly monochromatic composition has the combustive energy of a man freeing himself. Making animation and rhythm the primary issue, rather than devices to replicate a known subject, he enjoyed a new ease that allowed him to release his furies in a safe way.

For a long time, he had craved comfort. Only when he could avoid his demons, and invent a new mental abode where he could reside more than in the usual human orbit, could he have maximum vitality. At last he had a solution. He had begun to create walls.

VIII

For the rest of his life, Mondrian would make flat surfaces that serve as stopping points. They perform two vital functions. One is that they conceal. We do not know for sure what it is that they are blocking, what is behind them that Mondrian was determined to cover up. But it was essential *not* to see certain things. The second, more vital role of these partitions is that they create sights of utmost splendor. Their transcendent beauty not only diverts you from what is best kept hidden—at least from others—and made discrete in a safe sealed box. It provides unparalleled joy.

Eventually Mondrian walls would be translucent fronts. Windows on the universe, they would conjur infinity; they would gyrate with rhythm in an endless lightness. That lightness would be physical—in the sense of weightlessness—and optical, with the luminosity that comes from within. But in their inception in 1912, Mondrian made his walls like a new form of masonry.

Whether solid or transparent, all of these walls—from now until his death thirty two years later—would be declaratively impersonal. Nothing private shows in their making. Like a theatre backdrop that covers the ropes and wires and detritus backstage, they throw a shield in front of what is deliberately left unknown and allow none of it to seep into the performance.

Even when Mondrian worked on a purported still life that winter, he constructed a wall. When he revised *Still Life with Gingerpot 1* and made *Still Life with Gingerpot 2*, he retained the lovely, blue ceramic, oriental vessel—its

sheen splendid to behold, its roundness palpable—as a focal element, but mainly he invented an edifice of solid blocks. He fabricated it like a house in which the vertical elements are firmly planted on horizontal footings at the same time that they support crosspieces in a post and lintel arrangement. In the new milieu where Mondrian planned to spend the rest of his life, he was grounding himself by building sturdy, dependable compositions that anchored him.

#

He was constructing his personal life in the same way. With Van Domselaer as an undemanding companion in the evenings and on Sundays, Mondrian put more complex personal relationships behind him—or into a storage unit. The attempted partnerships were to be a thing of the past.

At least that was the plan. There would be one occasion in the future when, if the story is true, love would get the better of him. Other than that, he would never violate his commitment to personal independence. He had organized this new Paris existence exclusively in service of his art, which was the reason he had escaped there.

IX

Both the making and recognition of canvases in which he tried a brave new approach became the most important thing that mattered to the artist in his very particular dwelling on the rue du Départ. He was resolute, and had sufficient self-control to succeed at his mission. The former "political activist" had retreated completely from his ambition to participate in strikes or demonstrations. He sublimated his personal and emotional needs or, when he could not avoid them handled them efficiently—or banished them.

#

In the course of that first year when Mondrian was in Paris, a Dutch artist, Jan F. van Deene, and another painter named Jacob Bendien, saw Mondrian at some of those times when he was in need of socializing; Mondrian's human interactions suited his agenda for a life with a distinct hierarchy of priorities.

Van Deene and Bendien did not see nearly as much of him as Van Domselaer did, but, they came to know him fairly well. Like most of Mondrian's friends, these two men were considerably younger. Van Deene was fourteen years Mondrian's junior; Bendien was eighteen years younger, the same age as Van Domselaer.

In 1977, at age ninety-one, Van Deene would provide a vivid portrait of Mondrian as an amiable forty-year old developing his personal form of Cubism on the rue du Départ, living in solitude, rarely receiving others, but going out from time to time. They often overlapped at gallery openings. Van Deene recalled of Mondrian, 'I remember him as a simple and charming man without pretentions. He really wanted to be seen and for that reason

he attended all the openings. Bendien, because of this particularity, had surnamed him Piet-zie-je-me-niet ['Piet-have-you-seen-me']'[833] Yet while Mondrian went to every vernissage and was invariably "cheerful," he always stayed to the side. He had a conspicuous need to be recognized in public, yet he became intimate with no one. Lots of people were aware of him; no one knew him well.

Van Deene continues. 'He was forty years old; I was twenty-seven, Bendien was younger, and it is true that age makes a big difference. One day we went, all three of us, to a carnival. Mondrian, who was not at all a hermit, danced on Quatorze juillet, the French national holiday, at the local-street dance, merry and relaxed, with the working-class girls.'[834]

They were Mondrian's ideal dance partners. He had not known those women before; nor would he ever see them again. There was no risk of emotional connection or of future obligations. If they judged him in any way, it made no difference to him. He delighted in the contact while it lasted, for it imposed nothing. Certain of life's pleasures were essential to him, but his need to live unattached and independent, to be accountable to no one else, had become inviolable.

X

When Mondrian died in New York in 1944, he left behind few personal possessions. He had never collected things, and had always been the opposite of a packrat. He traveled lightly, had no need of memorabilia or any other reminders of the past, and was content to discard books he had finished reading. He kept his fine clothes, but of these he only had what was required to present himself impeccably.

On each occasion that Mondrian had been uprooted, he had taken less with him than on the previous. It had required a carriage and barge to accommodate the copper pieces and furniture and dog's objects when he left Uden following his year in Brabant in 1904 and returned to Amsterdam, but with each subsequent move—to Paris in 1912—to London in 1938—to New York in 1940—he accommodated himself to the realities of train or ship travel. Besides, the more he advanced his art, the less he required accoutrements to life.

Still, a fantastic memento of the years 1912-14 remained when Harry Holtzman went through the artist's modest digs in 1944. There were two pocket-sized sketchbooks, each about four by six inches, that had been acquired in the Netherlands. The bold script on their cardboard covers

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[833] Jan F. van Deene, *Rechtvaardiging*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht 1977, p. 79, as translated in Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 179.
[834] Van Deene, *Rechtvaardiging*, p. 79, as translated in Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 179-180.

simply says 'Schetsboek.' Mondrian filled one of these mostly in Paris in 1912-13, and the other in Domburg when he returned there in 1914.[835]

In these two notebooks, Mondrian voices the essential ideas that would guide him and his art for the rest of his life. He would eventually write long, obtuse essays elaborating the same concepts; here he succinctly expressed the kernel of the philosophy that at last cristallized those first years following his move to France.

Shortly after he settled in on the rue du Départ, Mondrian began to fill the first of these small notebooks of inexpensive paper with rapid sketches. He drew the rubble created from the building in which he had been living across the way, on the avenue du Maine, while it was being torn down to make way for the expansion of the Gare du Montparnasse. Looking out from his new home, he evoked the site in its various stages. Some of the building façades remained largely intact, others demolished. Alongside the sketches, he reflected on life, time, matter, and the values he held dear as all that is beyond our control occurs, and the life of the world takes its course. (Fig. 33)

Fig. 33. Mondrian, *Demolished building 3 & 6*; *Paris roofs*, 1913-1914

XI

Their state of repair is irrelevant in Mondrian's rendition of the structures Mondrian drew. A greater force matters more than their demolition. What counts is that they can be *seen*. And not just that. With our eyes we perceive

[835] These two sketchbooks have been reproduced in facsimile, transcribed and translated by: Robert P. Welsh and J.M. Joosten eds., *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912-1914,* Meulenhoff International, Amsterdam 1969.

so much, Mondrian shows us. Matter exists. Air is everywhere else. Light is like a godly force revealing the incredible scenario of life. In these drawings he made after arriving in Paris, Mondrian evokes the ongoing processes taking place in any given moment: past, present, and future.

Certain elements, consistent in all of these drawings, cause us to feel in our hearts and our guts the sheer thrill of looking at something, the magnificence of that act of beholding what is visible and having the extraordinary mechanisms with our brain make it appear before us. Mondrian works the charcoal with great animation in the foreground. The viewer, absorbing the force and liveliness of the strokes, intuitively has a sensation of excitement. The specifics of what the vigorous black dashes represent are a secondary matter. What counts is the process of making marks (as in cave painting), and then the events that occur as we look at those marks.

We know we are seeing courtyards, rubble, trees, and the remains of walls. It has taken nothing more than the dextrous application of graphite on paper to conjure what was an entire neighbourhood. Human residences no longer habitable, the sense of what shelter means to people, the air and light that remain even when what was once carefully constructed has now been shattered: all come to life. We also bear witness, in raw and fundamental form, to the will to make art, the urge to communicate in a way that has nothing to do with words. Mondrian has moved his hand in flourishes that celebrate the process of creating the seeable and exalt the mechanisms that allow us to see it. With his animated style and his palpably total engagement, he opens us to a new awareness of the material of paper; the structure and chemical components of a stick of charcoal, the ability of the human hand to move that stick, the power of light to facilitate vision, and the miracle of eyes.

We proceed past the combustion of the foreground. Further into the drawings, the windows that belong to structures that have been condemned and abandoned appear as their essential selves: as opportunities created to allow illumination into interiors and also to permit people inside to look outside. Mondrian has evoked windows in a generic, timeless way. Now that they no longer have their functions, as remnants in wall of empty buildings, the purpose they once served comes into sharper focus. One thinks of the role they have performed since their invention; their survival, however brief, since the building was evacuated, reminds us that they were in place before anyone moved in. Mondrian's skill is in part his rare capacity to get to the universal essence of his subject. We feel windows as the brilliant, inventive devices they are at their core, and also as a source of the pleasures of geometry, their crisp right angles and horizontal/vertical interplay charged with rhythmic energy.

In these clearly representational drawings he made in the same period when he was progressively eliminating more and more of the subject matter from his large oil paintings, Mondrian establishes the essential elements of

construction at its most fundamental. The building components he presents will be the main elements of his paintings for the rest of his life. Walls are screens against the elements and vehicles for privacy. Courtyards, like the white expanses of his abstract compositions, are providers of essential open space. Above all, it is the presence of light and air—which Mondrian evokes like a magician with a wand—that make these drawings celebrations of the essentials of human existence that will underlie all of his art from here forward. Wherever he has left the plain white paper untouched, it becomes either the cloudless sky above or the omnipresent air surrounding us, lower than what we think of as the sky, but contiguous to it. No single word exists for this ambient space. One might call it "the atmosphere," but how often do we think of "the atmosphere" as the air to the left and right of us, the slight space between our finger, the void underneath the bench on which we are seated? Mondrian makes us reflect on the invisible. He gives it scientific verity and its intrinsic cosmic glow.

In these settings where gravity exerts itself and invisible forces (centrifugal, magnetic) play in perpetuity, the verticals soar. They signify the human ability to build, the intelligence and willpower that have enabled our species to go further than any other in housing itself. And the horizontals provide the solid footing without which such construction could not exist. These drawings are vignettes of Paris in 1912, but their essential components apply to all places on earth, in all time periods. The eternal beauty was becoming the core of his life's work and therefore of his life in its totality.

#

Moving his pencil over the white paper as he conjured the courtyard, Mondrian was intoxicated. In his comportment he was reserved but intense, leading a disciplined and orderly existence—and in his words he was verbose, sometimes excessive in length, and largely unemotional—but when his language was purely visual he was ecstatic.

The physical energy that permeates these sketches is one of the reasons they are so fresh, their pleasures so immediate. Mondrian sketches with lines that fly across the walls and rooftops like a violinist's bow at top speed. Some of those spirited markings are horizontal, some diagonal, some vertical; regardless, they are all in perpetual motion. To evoke the dense assemblage of houses and sheds, he makes music on paper. The whiteness of the sky visible above the zigzagged contour of peaked and flat rooflines and, in the lower precinct, as air circulating between the picture plane and the image, is as luminous and bright as the lines are decisive. The apparent gusts Mondrian has created in the illusory space that exists beyond the surface of the piece of paper, before we get to the buildings, have this same amazing energy. Thanks to the way of life in which Mondrian kept his receptivity undisturbed, where nothing intruded on his concentration, he made his attentive seeing come to life.

In the perfect cocoon he had created on the rue du Départ, he was on fire. He poured his fever-pitch joy into every detail. And he had honed his technical skills so that he could realize his objectives with a new facility. The irregular ladders of free-hand parallel lines demonstrate his dexterity. He had developed the know-how to get his strokes perfectly straight without a ruler or metal edge while having them appear utterly spontaneous and organic. Mondrian had long been assured and confident in his artistry, but now he was on his game more than ever. He did not flaunt the new sharpness of his draftsmanship—he had no instinct to show off—but used it to recapitulate and enhance his wider vision. Paris delighted him with its urban landscape, presenting, as if he had never recognized them before, the acts of construction and enclosure. He was simply responding full throttle. His stimuli were competent engineering and mechanical systematization—within the natural universe that he had evoked reverentially ever since he made his first known drawing, and that were his elixir above all else. He, too, would use careful calculation and precise scaffolding to contain the magnificent events of everyday life.

#

Mondrian could easily have walked, in ten minutes time, to the Luxembourg Gardens, and drawn a fountain or a row of perfectly manicured flowering trees or the ornate façades of the palace that once housed the kings and queens of France. Instead, in tough black charcoal, on plain white paper, he drew the harsh horizontals and verticals of rooflines and drainpipes.

At age forty, having come to a new world, living with only the barest essentials, focusing on what was universal and absolute, Mondrian had succeeded to a new degree in what was historical or picturesque, or personal to his own experience. He had gotten to some higher sphere of living. Illustrating an inelegant everyday subject, in a straightforward way, he celebrated existence in its raw, fundamental form. In that high-ceilinged garret, on the rue du Départ, Mondrian had found his bearings.

XII

In March of 1913, Guillaume Apollinaire having named Mondrian as being among the artists of interest in his review of the 1912 Salon des Indépendants, now praised him more substantially. To be championed by Apollinaire was a big deal. Many people deified the poet and critic. For an artist relatively new to the Paris scene, the endorsement was both helpful and heartening.

Apollinaire had been born Wilhelm Albert Włodzimierz Apolinary Kostrowicki in 1880. His mother was a Polish noblewoman, daughter of a general in the Russian Imperial Army who had been killed in the Crimean War. Wilhelm never knew who his father was. He emigrated to France as a teenager, and from then on invented his own life.

Within a few years, having renamed himself Guillaume Apollinaire, he was writing poetry of such quality that it attracted the attention of among others, Pablo Picasso, Gertrude Stein, André Derain, Blaise Cendrars, and Erik Satie. In 1907, he penned an erotic novel, *The Eleven Thousand Rods*. It was banned soon after publication. The censorship was unusual in France given the libertine attitude toward sexually explicit literature there, yet this book was considered so shocking that its sale would remain illegal until 1970 in the country that meanwhile published Henry Miller and Pauline Réage. Apollinaire, determined to shock, had succeeded in crafting pornography that was too raunchy even in the country that held the Marquis de Sade as a cultural icon.

In September of 1911, the Parisian police threw the confrontational writer in jail for a week for assisting in the theft of the *Mona Lisa* from the Louvre. It was a reach on the part of "les flics." What Apollinaire had done, in fact, was to take in and shelter a Russian friend who had committed the crime. But the cops knew the writer to be a troublemaker, and wanted him where he could do no harm, even if only for a few days.

They were right about Apollinaire's wish to startle the public, but wrong about the effect of his imprisonment. Once in jail, Apollinaire managed to implicate Picasso, so that Picasso, too, was arrested—although quickly exonerated. Apollinaire then publically declared that the Louvre should be burned to the ground.

The same year that he began urging his readers to see Mondrian's work, Apollinaire was the talk of Paris because of the publication of his second collection of poetry, *Alcools*. He also wrote a widely disseminated essay on Cubism and coined the term "orphism" in reference to the move toward pure abstraction in painting.[836]

Apollinaire reviewed the 1913 Salon des Indépendants in *L'Intransigeant*, a popular avant-garde review. He advised his readers to see the work of Mondrian which was in Salle XVIII—the Dutch room. Kickert had made the selection of artists in and had included, besides Mondrian, some of Mondrian's lesser-known cohorts, among them Peter Alma, Jacoba von Heemskerck, Otto van Rees, and Lodewijk Schelfhout. Apollinaire singles out Mondrian's 'very abstract painting,' writing that his *Composition aux Arbres* and *Portrait of a Woman,* were of great interest.[837] He reports that 'Arbres' was one of 'the most noticed works'—along with paintings he named by Léger, Marie Laurencin, Metzinger, Gleizes, and Delaunay—in the large exhibition held from March 19 to May 18 in the structures built especially for the Salon along the Quai d'Orsay.

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[836] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Méditations esthétiques. Les peintres cubistes*, Figuière, Paris 1913. For Apollinaire's role in the introduction of "orphism", see: Virginia Spate, *Orphism. The evolution of non-figurative painting in Paris 1910-1914*, Clarendon, Oxford 1979, p. 60-81.

[837] Apollinaire, *L'Intransigeant et le journal de Paris*, March 22 1913.

Apollinaire also mentions that Cubism was known in the leading museums of Amsterdam, where Picasso and Braque were shown next to Rembrandt.[838] While he does not specify that this greater attention to the movement in the Netherlands than in Paris was in part thanks to Mondrian, he implicitly makes the artist he singles out in the Dutch gallery a key player in the new vision.

In an article for the magazine *Montjoie!*, Apollinaire depicts Mondrian as 'an offshoot of the Cubists' but 'certainly not their imitator.' The poet again makes sure that his readers realize that, while in France Cubism was largely ridiculed, Braque and Picasso had been well received in Amsterdam. He writes that Mondrian 'seems to have been influenced by Picasso above all, but his personality remains wholly his own.' He credits Mondrian as having a 'sensitive, cerebral approach. His Cubism follows a different path than the one Braque and Picasso appear to take.'[839]

Picasso lived quite near to the rue du Départ. In 1912, he was at 242 Boulevard Raspail, and then, once Kahweiler sold more of his work, in more comfortable digs at 5 bis rue Schoelcher. Picasso spent a lot of time in Spain that year—but Paris was his home base.[840] We know already from that letter he would write to Van Doesburg in 1917 giving his reasons for the conscious decision not to meet Picasso, nine years his junior, but the extent to which it was a calculated avoidance is extraordinary. The same for Braque and Gris, making the exception of Léger that much more interesting.

They all frequented Le Dôme. Braque and Mondrian presumably attended the opening of a Salon exhibition. Picasso certainly not, since he was in Spain right then.[841] If not that, they would have overlapped at other openings. Mondrian preferred his dinners out with young men like Van Domselaer, with whom he could speak Dutch. The reason he avoided, above all, Picasso, whose work had such an impact on him in 1912 and 1913, was more complex than simply the aesthetic difference about which he would write Van Doesburg in hindsight five years later. When Mondrian walked up those three rickety flights of stairs in solitude and paint in his white uniform, he was content not to have engaged with as forceful a personality as Picasso. It was not exactly a matter of competitiveness. It was knowing that to converse with Picasso would have been a challenge, and Mondrian assiduously avoided expending energy on complex human interaction. Companions like Van Domselaer, not famous, not having made it in the world, were easy to be with, and they were reverent toward him. He

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[838] *L'Intransigeant*, March 22 1913.
[839] Apollinaire, *Montjoie!*, March 18 1913, as quoted in Janssen, *Path to Abstraction*, p. 185.
[840] For Picasso's life in Montparnasse, see John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso Volume II: 1907-1917*, Jonathan Cape, London 1996, p. 259-300.
[841] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso Volume II*, p. 274.

could be silent if he wanted, or he could hold forth; the terms were Mondrian's to decide.

Besides, he knew that Picasso's life was full of drama, and the personal sides were entwined with his art. Rather than conceal or set aside issues of women and sex, the Spaniard put them into even his most restrained Cubist compositions. Picasso's art richly mirrored a complex melange of his intellectual, political and personal concerns. Sometimes the issues were profound, while at other moments they were minor aspects of his quotidian existence; regardless, Picasso focused on what was mortal, and on himself. That approach was antithetical to Mondrian's subsuming need for art to be an "other." Mondrian was determined to create a spiritual habitat that transcended everyday life, and to find a realm of beauty unrelated to his persona, or even to the time and place in which he lived. Picasso's art was vital to his getting to that new territory; it provided the technical groundwork. But to know Picasso as a person was to enter the bullring—Mondrian, even if he stayed on the sidelines, did so as a form of action, and was never a spectator—and the only battle Mondrian wanted to fight was with his painting.

When he walked those stairs back up to the studio in solitude, he was thinking about angles and colors, and the width of lines. If his mind strayed to sex, other people, or his own feelings, he had no wish whatsoever to make them part of his work. Picasso would more likely have been thinking about when he would bed the woman on his arm. If he painted a female form, his lust was in every brushstroke. Mondrian, meanwhile, made his walls, his divine façades, and kept his individual self concealed behind.

XIII

Determined though he was never to let human interaction stand in the way of his art-making, Mondrian had enlarged the devoted circle of young Dutchmen who provided a combination of unthreatening diversion and emotional support. Van Domselaer, Van Deene, and Bendien—all a full generation younger—were the core. Another Dutch émigré, the painter Lodewijk Schelfhout, only nine years Mondrian's junior, had been a loyal friend since they met through Kickert, and, as a neighbour at 26, rue du Départ, was a stalwart in Mondrian's system. Schelfhout was not nearly as talented or adventurous an artist as Mondrian, but his work was a pleasant variation of Cubism, with his woodland and harbour scenes resembling lyrical and tamer versions of Braque's canvases of similar subjects. When Schelfhout returned to the Netherlands in February 1913 in order to marry a Dutch woman, Mondrian felt the loss. Yet, believing that he was observing the life he might have had when Schelfhout left all that was Paris and the life of solitude in a modest studio for domesticity back in the Netherlands, Mondrian was further convinced he had made the right decision. He

observed attentively as Schelfhout's new experience unfolded. It confirmed Mondrian's own resolve to avoid emotional messiness. To an extent unusual for Mondrian, he noted and even wrote about the tensions between Schelfhout and the family of his fiancée, Albertine van der Meulen.[842] Mondrian felt that in rejecting the life he had been within a hair of starting with Greta Heijbroek, he had wisely escaped this exact level of complications. His involvement in what was going on for Schelfhout itself violated his determination to eschew the expenditure of time and of emotional energy on the personal, when both would be better spent on artistic creation, but it was oddly vital for him, in this one instance, to council a friend.

I am fascinated by Mondrian's lack of reticence in plunging into Schelfhout's pre-marital drama. And I am convinced it is because Mondrian was imagining himself and his own comportment if he had not broken off his marriage engagement. Mondrian wrote Schelfhout with disarming candor: "I also heard about some strange things you apparently did, but I am pretty sure you had good reasons for all of that."[843]

Still, he hoped that they would see one another again even though Schelfhout had left Paris and moved back to the country where Mondrian had no intention of ever returning for more than a short visit. He apologized for not keeping in closer touch, emphasizing that the only reason Schelfhout had not heard from him was because he had been working so hard.

It was not just a fact; it was a bit of a taunt. To work without diversion was the ideal Schelfhout had forsaken. Mondrian continued. He was wondering what it was like to be back in the Netherlands after living in Paris. He reminded his friend that a year earlier he, Schelfhout, had complained bitterly after returning to the Netherlands for nothing more than a quick visit. Schelfhout had insisted that he no longer felt at home there. He then wrote that life must be quite perfect for Schelfhout because of the woman he would marry.[844] Without being deliberately condescending, Mondrian probably did not say this simply to be warm and supportive. He knew, of course, that Schelfhout did not have what it took to warrant sacrificing his life for artistic creation.

#

In May of 1913, Mondrian confessed to Schelfhout that his work on a commissioned copy was his salvation "otherwise I would be flat broke again!"[845] Between the lines, he was telling his friend that if he had to support a wife and a family, there would have been no chance to make his

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[842] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, March 4 1913, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 73. For Schelfhout's biographical background and the specific tensions with the family of his fiancée, see: Almering-Strik, *Lodewijk Schelfhout*, p. 70.
[843] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, March 4 1913, RKD #0278 inv.nr. 66.
[844] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, May 25 1913, RKD #0278 inv.nr. 67.
[845] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, May 25 1913, RKD #0278 inv.nr. 67.

own art. Finances were a battle even when he had no one to support other than himself.

Mondrian's late summer visit to his father in Arnhem and outing to the seaside at Domburg had become annual rites, but in 1913 he could not afford to travel to the Netherlands without taking on outside work to bolster his income. To be singled out by Apollinaire was nice, but he was not making enough money from selling paintings of the type that might win the approval of a rebellious critic but were too experimental for collectors. Paying for train tickets on top of rent had broken him. As soon as he got to Amsterdam, Mondrian needed to take on another commission. On July 29, he registered at the Rijksmuseum to make a copy of an early nineteenth-century portrait. It was certainly not Mondrian's dream to do so. His client's choice was Jan Kieft's portrait of G.M. Cort Heyligers, painted in 1831.[846] Cort Heyligers was a lieutenant general in the Dutch infantry. A cocky character, he flaunted medals all over his chest, and held his impressive hat by wrapping his right arm around it with pride in its significance. Neither the artistic style nor the arrogant gesture were Mondrian's sort of thing.

At the age of forty-one, a known personality who was praised and attacked for whatever he showed in the most avant-garde exhibitions of the day, Mondrian had no choice but to join the art students half his age slaving away at the Rijksmuseum. With their easels set up, their brushes and tubes of paint neatly spread before them, and their permits in view, they all worked away as the summer heat poured in. Mondrian's task was to copy the painting in front of him as meticulously as possible. Were he to interpret or revise—in the way that Matisse had rephrased Poussin at the Louvre, and Picasso would do with his own versions of Velázquez —he would still be broke. He made a perfect facsimile. As when he did his biological drawings, the technical prowess of Piet Mondrian must have been amazing, but the emotional sacrifice was significant. Yet Mondrian never for a moment bemoaned necessity.

All of this material—Mondrian's copies after the Masters, and the drawings over which he labored for months on end for Dr. Calcar—have been lost. If we could see them, we would learn a lot about Mondrian that will remain unknown forever.

I assume that what would come through would be not just a tremendous level of skill, but a quality of patience. Except for the time when he finally had had enough of living under the Van Calcars' roof and could not wait to be liberated (through no fault of theirs, only his own need, as a man in his thirties, to stop living like an indentured servant), he never complained about any of these tasks. Maybe he relished the act of meticulous copying. Perhaps it allowed him a mindlessness that served a purpose, enabling him to escape his own intensity.

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[846] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 104.

But this is all hypothesis. It is possible that the bacteriological drawings and copies of old paintings would show Mondrian to be off his game when he was copying rather than creating, to be too fiery and restless to apply himself successfully when he was deprived of the chance to compose, to select colors, to be the one in charge, and to invent. We will never know. Without the by-products of his labors, all we can say for sure is that Mondrian had to do hard labor with pencil and paints at tasks that required methodology and discipline and a high degree of technical skill, and did the job with sufficient professionalism to satisfy his clients and earn the kroners or francs he needed to survive.

XIV

The Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon opened on September 20, 1913 in Berlin. Mondrian had two paintings in it.[847] Their titles—*Tableau 1* and *Tableau 2*—in German *Gemälde I* and *Gemälde II*—were themselves bold statements, since, in either language the word simply means "Painting." In the hours of freedom Mondrian had bought for himself, he had made paintings that were entirely abstract, deliberately absent even the slightest feint at the representation of a known subject. The inclusion of these two canvases was, as its name states, the first autumn "salon" in Germany. No one anticipated that it would also be the last. The show was organized by Herwarth Walden, editor of the magazine *Der Sturm* and owner of the eponymous gallery. The exhibition took place on the third floor of a large building on Potsdamer strasse, not far from Walden's own gallery. These unusual paintings, which would remain there until December 1, were seen and discussed by a large and vociferous public.

Mondrian had been working on *Tableau 1* and *Tableau 2* for most of 1913 up until the time of his trip to the Netherlands. While also winding up his series of drawings of buildings and trees, in the course of this second year in Paris he had become obsessed with developing his art in which all imagery of natural sights was totally eliminated. He put two further paintings, equally abstract and with the same nondescript titles, into the Moderne Kunstkring show at the Stedelijk that opened on November 7. H.P. Bremmer, a connoisseur and art critic who was one year older than Mondrian, and who was the advisor to the art collector Helene Kröller-Müller, bought *Tableau N° 1* (this being the exact same name as one of the paintings in Berlin) for her out of the exhibition.[848] And he also acquired a work from the astonishing series—*Tableau N° 3*—for himself.[849]

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[847] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 27.
[848] B37 *Tableau No.1*, 1913, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo.
[849] B33 *Tableau No.3: Composition in Oval*, 1913, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Once Bremmer discovered Mondrian's work, Bremmer set out to help the struggling artist in as dignified and effective a way as possible. Today Bremmer's name is largely unknown to the national public. Even at his peak of activity, he stayed behind the scenes most of the times. He was the opposite of the powerful rich people of our own era who want to make a conspicuous splash. But in this crucial period of Mondrian's life, Bremmer was the artist's lifeline. He bought work, and he got Helene Kröller-Müller to buy even more. The two of them changed Mondrian's life forever.

XV

Henricus Petrus Bremmer, called "Henk", was born in Leiden in 1871. The son of hotel owners, he developed a passion for art at a young age. His taste and enthusiasm came out of the blue, alien to his parents or background. Still, Henk's mother and father let themselves be persuaded to allow their son to take classes with the painter D. L. Kooreman and, when he was seventeen years old, to enroll at the Academie voor Beeldende Kunsten (Academy for Visual Arts) in The Hague. The traditional approach to art making did not suit the wealthy young man, however. He soon dropped out of art school and rented a studio with friends back in Leiden. Two years later, he moved to the attic of his parents' hotel to live solo and keep painting.[850]

On visits to Leiden, the artists Jan Toorop, Théo van Rysselberghe, and Henry van de Velde all stayed in the Bremmers' hotel during the period when Henk was making art under the eaves. The young painter met them, and began to paint in a neo-impressionist and pointillist manner under their influence. He soon started to write art critics in magazines and eventually in 1896 he became an independent art educator and adviser with rare flare.[851]

A passionate teacher, Bremmer bought paintings just so that they could be studied in class. Once they had served as teaching tools, he sold them to his wealthy students who could afford them.[852] He began writing about how to view art, and started to publish monthly portfolios, each with nine art reproductions. The work was by some of the most adventurous artist of the day, among them Jan and Charley Toorop, Sluijters, and Bart van der Leck.

Then, in 1907, he became a purchasing adviser to Helene Kröller-Müller, who was one of his pupils. Combined, they were a formidable force in the art world of the era.[853]

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[850] Hildelies Balk, *De Kunstpaus. H.P.Bremmer 1871-1956*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2006, p. 24-28.
[851] Balk, *De* Kunstpaus, p. 38-81..
[852] Balk, *De* Kunstpaus, p. 190-192. Cf. Eva Rovers, *De eeuwigheid verzameld. Helene Kröller-Müller 1869-1939*, Prometheus, Amsterdam 2010, p. 95.
[853] Rovers, *De eeuwigheid verzameld*, p. 96-97.

#

Born Helene Emma Laura Juliane Müller in 1869, Kröller-Müller was wealthy by birth and wealthier by marriage. From Essen, a city in northern Germany not far from the Dutch border, she was the daughter of a rich industrialist who supplied raw materials to mine owners and steel manufacturers; at age nineteen, she had married the Dutch shipping tycoon Anton Kröller, who had a fortune to which he gave his wife nearly unlimited access. In 1913 Kröller-Müller made the decision to turn her house in The Hague into a museum. Part of the house would remained private, but the rest was to be open to all at appointed times. One of the richest people in the Netherlands, while consistently modest in demeanor, Kröller-Müller was eager for her immense financial means to serve the general good.

By the time she turned her house into a museum, this affable, unpretentious, handsome woman had become among the first collectors of Van Gogh's work. She would eventually own over ninety Van Gogh paintings and a hundred and eighty-five of his drawings; she would also buy important work by Picasso, Léger, Gris, and Seurat. When she considered acquiring Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, she unwisely accepted Bremmer's advice not to, but generally both she, and he, made excellent choices.

Helene Kröller-Müller assiduously avoided work by the German Expressionists and other artists currently at work in her homeland. She had the interesting, and independent, view that they were "insufficiently authoritative."[854] Dutch modernism, on the other hand, appealed to her immensely. She would buy over four hundred works by Bart van der Leck in one fell swoop at the end of 1917, by which time she had often acquired Mondrian's very latest work, either directly or from Bremmer, and also had begun to collect his earlier pieces. In December of 1917, for example, she would obtain the 1912-13 *Composition No. XVI* for a hundred and fifty guilders.[855] But the purchase of *Tableau N°1* when it was barely dry in 1913 was the support that meant the most to Mondrian.[856] Risking such a brave new approach in his art, he could hardly have imagined having such an enlightened patron. Kröller-Müller and Bremmer in tandem enabled him to keep paying the rent while encouraging him to approach the art of painting in a completely unprecedented way.

#

Even the slightest hint of familiar subject matter, visible in spite of all that could not be deciphered in *The Tree* the year before, is now gone. That total

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[854] Sheila Farr, 'How a museum founder helped turn Van Gogh into an international icon', *The Seattle Times*, May 23, 2004.

[855] B26 *Composition No.XVI / Compositie I*, 1912-13, Fondation Beyeler, Basel.

[856] B37 *Tableau No.1*, 1913, oil on canvas, 96 x 64 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum

independence from the task of representing a known sight empowered Mondrian to paint with the assuredeness and gusto that occurred on those occasions when he was feeling his most inspired. Periodically he had had these apogees. *Woods near Oele* and *The Red Cloud* had also been summits, but there you were not sure to what extent the charge of beauty was produced by nature as well as painting. *Tableau N° 1* (Fig. 34) meets the viewer with the solid force of these high notes of the past, but this time it is exclusively rooted in artistic invention. The forms and color organization make it rippled like a choppy sea, yet, at the same time, the surface is a flat plane, even if within it there are skips and starts. The canvas is intensely lively, but the animation is under complete control, like a well executed jitterbug, its high-octane energy is tempered with a pervading equanimity. The overall composition is like a metropolis: gridded and ordered at the same time that it is complex and full of nuance.

Fig. 34. Mondrian, *Tableau No.1*, 1913

Mondrian had developed very exacting means to facilitate the non-stop movement while keeping the overall balance. His main device was the meticulous deployment of warm tans and bluish grays. The soft white accents on forms of either color create linkages that cause the perpetual flow. While he assiduously eschewed the representation of movement in his earlier figurative work, now the artist, working abstractly, happily created it.

He has constructed the overall scaffolding out of black lines that are predominantly vertical and horizontal. Yet Mondrian assiduously avoids being formulaic. He has also allowed himself a number of gentle curves, as

well as a few diagonals, to keep the viewer's eye moving upward. That sense of ascension and the way the painting appears to grow organically upwards from its base give it a buoyant optimism. Immersed in these forms, we rise into the higher orbit of spirituality. This painting is the realization of the ideal state of being symbolized by the middle figure in the *Evolution Triptych*. How amazing that Mondrian had painted it only two years earlier. In little time, he has invented a new form with which to establish the qualities he idealized in the woman with her abstract jaw. With abstraction, we, too, are elevated above the earthly sphere.

In true Cubist style, *Tableau N° 1* has elements of noses in profile and bowler hats and lips and shoulders and wine carafes. Yet even though these elements are naturalistic, Mondrian has now moved decisively into territory absent all narrative. There are no psychological issues. This distilled vision is an antidote to human hardship, to emotional struggle, and to private agonies. In his new life as a solitary Parisian, Mondrian had started to make paintings that were a complete diversion from all other concerns in life. This is what they are for the viewer, as surely and richly as for him.

#

In 1917-18, when Mondrian was back in the Netherlands, he would reflect on the link between the impact of moving to the center of Paris and the art he had begun to create once he felt settled there. He considered the urban setting vital to the creative outburst in which he made *Tableau N° 1*.

'As abstract life given form: it is closer to him [man] than nature and it will more easily stir aesthetic emotion in him. For in the metropolis nature is already tensed, ordered by the human spirit. The relationships and rhythm of plane and line in its architecture will move man more directly than the capriciousness of nature. In the metropolis, beauty is expressed more mathematically; it is here that the mathematical artistic temperament of the future will develop-here the New Style will emerge.'[857]

Mondrian's claim, in fact, while it applied to him, was in fact not true for most people. *He* found architecture more moving than nature; the vast majority of human beings would pick a sunset over an unpopulated beach, or a waterfall deep in the woods over a bustling metropolis, as sights to stir their hearts. Presenting his own vision of things, Mondrian was apparently unaware that it was not everyone else's.

Even at the Bauhaus, which Walter Gropius would found the year after Mondrian made his statement about the metropolis, and where Gropius and other masters all wanted to forge links with modern urbanism, nature would reign supreme. Paul Klee taught his students to study the flow of rivers, with their progress from their beginnings high in the mountains downstream toward the sea, in order to be anchored in the fundamental order of

[857] Mondrian, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst', in: *De Stijl* 1(1918)8, p. 132, note 8, as translated in Holtzman & James, *Complete writings,* p. 59.

existence.[858] Klee considered such natural events to be *less* capricious and *more* mathematical than the random, physical and emotional occurrences within cities. The first and second location of that great modernist art school—Weimar and Dessau—provided access to large and beautiful parks where Klee and Kandinsky went every day to get their inspiration. Anni Albers was immersed in Goethe's *Metamorphosis of the Plants;* she made the underlying numeric structure which Goethe elucidated in plant growth central to her abstract textiles.[859]

While Mondrian describes his own experiences and needs as if they were universal, they were, in fact, exceptional, even among the most forward-thinking modern artists. But what he encountered in the center of Paris was so personally salubrious that he could not imagine that what was his elixir was not the same for everyone else. He had found a solution. The metropolis became what Brabant and the region near Oele had been only a few years previously: a means of getting away from something, and of replacing anything that might have troubled him with ease and pleasure. And this time, the solution really worked.

#

Shortly after selling Bremmer and his client those two paintings, Mondrian wrote the critic a letter in which he cited the objective behind his predominantly gray-brown palette and the cubistic break-up of forms.

'Because my purpose in constructing the lines and colour combinations on a flat plane is to visualize beauty per se in the most conscious way. Nature (or that which I observe) inspires me; it affects me, as it does all artists, with the emotion that incites creation, but I want to get as close to the truth as possible, which is why I try to reduce everything to its essence (but ever a visual essence) by means of abstraction. To my mind it is self-evident that by not trying to say something *specific*, one may succeed in making the most specific and (all-embracingly) *truthful* of statements.'[860]

He cheerfully admits Picasso's importance to him, with none of the usual "I invented this and did it on my own" purported by most artists. 'I am not ashamed of mentioning this influence, because I think it is better to be receptive to improvement than to content oneself with a level of imperfection once it has been attained, in the estimation that it enhances one's originality, as so many artists seem to think. Besides, I am certainly completely different than Picasso, as indeed is generally said.'[861]

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[858] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 155.
[859] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 372-373.
[860] Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914. RKD #,0613 inv. nr 19.
[861] Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914. RKD #,0613 inv. nr 19.

Originality, or what he thought of himself, were not what counted. The issue for Mondrian was to engage with color and light and visual rhythm to evoke universal forces in all their majesty.

It is something higher than any of us that matters above all. Mondrian had found the means to evoke it.

XVI

Especially when their form is oval, the modest-scaled, Cubist canvases Mondrian painted on the rue du Départ could be mistaken for work by Georges Braque even more than Picasso. Mondrian's sensibility inclined him toward Braque's particular finesse and pictorial grace. Like Braque, he was in love with beauty more than ideas. The similarity of the two artists predated Cubism. Their shared passion for what was pleasing had been manifest in the upbeat colors and sweeping forms of Mondrian's *Red Cloud* and *Woods near Oele* just as in Braque's Fauvist harbour scenes. Now, in 1913, they were still working in a parallel manner. Mondrian was trying to quiet himself, much as Braque was. Like the Frenchman, he was instinctively subtle, and if anyone was his model, it was Braque; in his Cubism, the lines and brushstrokes, as well as the tonality, are softer and more delicate than Picasso's.

In his new Paris life, adapting himself to the Cubist idiom, Mondrian had turned down the tone. His palette was pale, his forms nuanced; in his foray into a new domain in which to escape the familiar, he sought balance and delicacy above all. The restraint was part of his increased effort to take himself out of his art, but it did not stuttify him. Rather than being flat and smooth, theses compositions from 1913 are like the stone and brick walls painted by Pieter de Hooch in the seventeenth century. The primary elements of composition have crevices and bulges, and the irregular units are held in place as if with hand-applied grout. At the same time, their porous surfaces are animated by continuous action of his paintings of a gently rolling sea. Yet the irregularity and movement do not impede the essential nature of what Mondrian has done, which is to have created barriers. These paintings have texture, but they bring about a halt. There is no going behind them, or seeing what is on the other side.

Having left his native country, living in the center of a city famous for its night life, Mondrian, single and unencumbered, might have seen Paris as an open door to new adventures. Even though he had little money, there was opportunity all over town for him to let loose. Instead, he made masonry with which to keep himself sequestered.

#

In 1973, the seventy-nine-year-old New York-based psychoanalyst Phyllis Greenacre published, in the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly*, a journal for her co-professionals, a paper called 'The primal scene and the sense of reality'

which include 'reflections on the life and work of the painter, P. Mondrian.'[862] It illuminates what happened to Mondrian and consequently to his art as he redefined himself following his arrival in Paris.[863]

Greenacre is modest in tone, using the term 'some reflections' for her commentary. She does not purport to know with certitude that the theories she posits are facts. But the text on Mondrian with which she concludes her study of 'the influence of the primal scene on the development and functioning of the sense of reality' makes a strong case for the idea that the reason he began to paint walls—and, in effect, continued to do so for the rest of his life—stems from his having witnessed, 'through seeing or hearing,' his parents having sexual intercourse, as well as, very possibly, the births of his younger brothers. In Amersfoort, where he slept in the room with his parents, who produced Willem two years following his own birth, and Louis three years later, Mondrian, was probably awakened periodically by the sounds if not the sight of love making. His brother Carel was born in Winterswijk, shortly after Mondrian moved there at age eight, but he, too, was conceived in Amersfoort, where Piet and his young brothers remained in their mother and father's bedroom, whereas only their older sister slept apart from them.

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[862] Phyllis Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene and the Sense of Reality', in: *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* 42(1973), p. 10-41.

[863] It is always risky to apply Freudian thought to biography. I claim no psychoanalytic insight myself, and would never pretend to have it. I am dissembling. The psychoanalyst with whom I began treatment nearly three decades ago would have asked, rhetorically, "Aren't we being a bit disingenuous here?" One of the benefits of my own seven years of analysis, four times a week, was that I came to see that there are reasons we are the way we are, even if we cannot necesseraly identify them; concomitantly, I believe that there were pivotal childhood events that affected Mondrian forever after. Still, analysis had a reverse effect as well. I stopped thinking that *they*—doctors and teachers—knew all the answers, and had x-ray vision, while we laypeople simply accept their words as gospel. I realized the fallability of the belief that anyone can know the sources of a person's nature, his or her drives or gifts or struggles, even if the individual you hope to understand is yourself. I would never venture to offer my own psychoanalytic hypothesis about Piet Mondrian. It is hard enough to get the simple facts right—when he was where, whether he attended his mother's funeral—so I would certainly not try to imagine his unrecorded traumas, on the basis of his resultant behaviour, which is what Phyllis Greenacre does. Yet I consider Greenacre's premise brilliant. A layman, I would never have proffered a medical theory like hers, attributing Mondrian's dependence on wall-like paintings to his early emotional experiences, but I think that Greenacre's deductions about his formative traumas are on the money. Phyllis Greenacre's essay, I believe, enables us to know our subject far better than almost any other text ever written about Mondrian, which is why I want you to know about it.

Even if the psychoanalyst's postulates depend on theories rather than ironclad facts, it is almost inevitable that Greenacre is correct that Mondrian experienced those primal scenes. I agree with her that Mondrian's essential isolation, in how he lived as well as what he painted, starting with the move to Paris following the abrupt cancellation of his wedding plans, and subsequently for the rest of his life, may well have been a consequence of such exposures. His splendid walls were blockades. He wanted something forgotten, or at least hidden from his thoughts. His painted backdrops created areas of safety that were in part a means of dealing with his inability to integrate sex and emotional connectedness into his life.

Dr. Greenacre writes that the impact of witnessing a primal scene before a child is three years old often has lasting physical manifestations later in life. At about three, the child gains the use of language to communicate his reaction to his parents. Even if raised in a Calvinist milieu like the Mondriaans' household, where no one would have said a word about such a matter, a child processes startling events differently because of his verbal consciousness. The impact is more profound when the event occurs when the child is only an infant or toddler. Greenacre, believing Mondrian would have had this experience in those pre-verbal years, writes 'The impression of the primal scene must be deposited more in the physical components of the emotional reactions than would be true at a later age.'[864] She eventually uses this general observation as the lynchpin of her analysis of Mondrian's posture and bearing, in particular when he danced.

No doubt some of you are rolling your eyes at these notions. But I hope you will come to see that what Greenacre presents, and what I have chosen to summarize and at times amplify, is likely and logical. Her presentation of the facts and their effects is not just hypothetical. If Greenacre's perspective did not seem valid and trenchant to me, throughout nearly a decade of getting as close as possible to Piet Mondrian, I would not call a little-known article in an obscure psychoanalytic journal to your attention. I have not taken to her theories to be sensational. Something was distinctly screwy about all of Pieter and Johanna Mondriaan's children. The word 'screwy' may seem frivolous, but it is more apt than any other. Three of five of them technically got married, but none lived happily with anyone else, male or female. Willem, the only one to produce offspring, moved half way across the world to do so, and following his wife's death after they had been married only five years, appears never to have become closely involved with anyone else. I see Phyllis Greenacre's viewpoint as a source of insight into Mondrian's fantastic imagination, especially as it became manifest following his move to Paris—a major step in his breaking away from whatever burdened him. Mondrian, and, to varying degrees his siblings, Greenacre makes clear, was suffering from wounds he wanted to heal. He realized, following the broken engagement with Greta Heijbroek, that the fulfilment

[864] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 13.

that most people achieve, or try to obtain, through sex, personal intimacy, and their families, was, in his case, an unrealizable dream. Greenacre's idea that the enchanting walls he constructed in his art were a form of self-protection, as well as a happy substitute for what eluded him, makes complete sense. Those walls blocked both the recent past and the traumas of his childhood, even if he did not remember them consciously. They relieved a discomfort, whether or not he recognized its origins. They provided not just balance and harmony; they displaced pain with exuberance. By making his barriers so beautiful, not only did Mondrian screen out what could never be resolved, but he entered paradise. His new approach to painting enabled him to replace discomfort with a feeling of rightness, and unadulterated pleasure.

#

The art Mondrian made in his self-liberation from his emotional burdens, starting in 1912 and for the rest of his life, succeeds in uplifting many of us as it did him. This is thanks to its *look* of liberation. Greenacre's insights are a torch to our seeing where Mondrian's creation of a paradise comprised of abstract form, and color that refers to nothing but itself, probably came from his continued experience of primal scenes not just in his pre-verbal stage, when it affected his subsequent physical stiltedness, but also at age four. Then the by-products of his exposure became quite different from when he was younger.

The psychoanalyst writes, 'The phallic phase, with its peak in the fourth year of life, has long been recognized as the time of most sensitivity to external genital stimulations of whatever nature. Exposure to the primal scene, witnessing the birth of a sibling or the occurrence of a miscarriage […] may then have a fateful influence on the child's developing conception of the nature of sexuality. This is of special importance as occurring when the Oedipus complex is already close to its height. The impression of the sexual relationship as being a sadistic act and the fear of castration have long been emphasized as significant misinterpretations which might complicate the child's later sexual development.'[865]

If Mondrian, a forty year old unattached man, handsome and in good physical shape, had renounced sex by the time he got to Paris (his sex life before then having itself been a mystery), Greenacre's reflections on his early childhood would help explain why sexuality was something he could not cope with; and why, concomitant with his having recently broken his wedding engagement and precipitously abandoned the idea of a union with a woman, he had begun to take representation out of his art, and, in so doing, ceased trying to paint illusions of three-dimensional space and chosen to create flat walls instead. Greenacre in effect also explains why Mondrian made vertical-horizontal dynamism—which, by *his own* definition (we will get to this, but the idea of vertical lines as male and horizontal ones

[865] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 13.

as female was vital to Mondrian, a theory about which he wrote passionately), replicated aspects of sexual congress, its joy and energy—central to his art.

In Paris, it seems that Mondrian had made a pivotal decision for himself. He may have been adhering to the Theosophical mandate for abstinence; he may have been afraid of sex; he may really have believed what he told E.L.T. Mesens about the artistic powere diminished by ejaculation. One doesn't know for sure, of course. But he successfully imbued his paintings with the energy and total, consuming engagement, of good sex.

#

Referring to Mondrian's early childhood and its aftermath, Phyllis Greenacre writes that the reaction to the experience of a primary scene is denial. 'Denial as a defensive maneuver' causes a person who has had exposure to his parents' lovemaking to 'eliminate the external world by turning his head and eyes away.'[866] This is a perfect account of Mondrian in almost all group photos, looking to the side. It also evokes the famous occasions when he insisted on being reseated so as not to face an open window out of which he would see trees. Denial furthers repression and can prompt 'isolation, rationalism, and displacement.' It can cause someone to eschew 'conflict … body feelings … superego-determined anxieties, etc.' Greenacre specifies that with Mondrian, 'There is a special form of denial which, with such accessory defensive paraphernalia as repression, isolation, and displacement, become so strengthened that it forms a wall, illusory, yet built as though for permanence.'[867]

Greenacre's sole biographical source on Mondrian was Michel Seuphor's 1956 book. She knew nothing of Albert van den Briel's unpublished reminiscences. Still, without any factual awareness of the events that *we* know occurred, thanks to Van den Briel, Greenacre perfectly characterizes the homosexual complications that in all likelihood drove Mondrian out of Amsterdam for his year in Brabant. Greenacre explains the creation of a wall as serving to keep someone 'from being overcome by his own primitive instinctual drives, both aggressive and sexual. This wall has usually been built in gradual stages from early childhood, and sometimes marked by crises. The original shock reactions are related to, and sometimes combined with, experiences of awe, but often have arisen out of more painful experiences in which anger has been more specifically aroused.'[868]

This is precisely how Van den Briel describes Mondrian in reaction to his anarchist friends and the man who claimed to have had an intimate sexual relationship with him. Greenacre concludes that 'the wall, in whatever form, is built to restrain wildness, to hold in check impulses felt as though of murderous rage, or nearly uncontrollable sexual impulses.

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[866] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 20.
[867] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 26.
[868] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 26.

Those instincts were behind Mondrian's creation of the wall, modified in an extraordinary way in accord with the demands of this talented artist.'[869]

Greenacre plunges into Mondrian's mind audaciously, but also carefully and professionally. While she makes pointed observations, she never presumes to know an iota of information about which she is not entirely sure. She has the prudence to use Michel Seuphor's book for rudimentary facts but not for Seuphor's personal observations and poetic asides. Greenacre also depends on Mondrian's 'Natural Reality and Abstract Reality,' an essay he wrote at age forty-seven, and his 'Toward a True Vision of Reality,' written when he was sixty-nine, trenchantly observing: 'Although these are so impersonal as to seem aseptic, they are very revealing.'[870] Above all, she looks closely and alertly at the work.

Bringing Mondrian to the period in 1913 when he started painting his wall-like compositions and launched himself in the direction he would maintain forever after, Greenacre characterizes the artist as having 'a single-minded devotion to the goal of purifying his vision, to free it from all subjectivity of emotion.'[871] This occurred once he was settled on the rue du Départ, for he believed he had moved permanently—even if it did not turn out that way—from his homeland to a foreign country, into a totally different cultural milieu where the tenets of Calvinism had no bearing, and where his childhood memories seemed more distant. Greenacre's analysis of his immersion in abstraction as a personal solution is logical.

XVII

Mondrian's total eschewal of recognizable subject matter in 1913 was both the entry into the happy territory he would inhabit for the rest of his life and the natural culmination of a process that had long been ongoing. He had almost always avoided the personal in his painting. He shunned autobiographical issues, and the particularities of his own psychic formation. When he was still living in the Netherlands, he had painted self-portraits that suggest an individual probing certain mysteries. When he subsequently proposed firing bullets into one of them, it added to the drama. His portrait-like flower paintings, and allegories like *Passion Flower* and *Evolution,* have a theatrical look of soul-searching. Now, with his essential solitude in Paris, the curtains had fallen. Mondrian eschewed any human interaction in which he would have to face complexities that made him uncomfortable, and eliminated them entirely from his art. Living alone, maintaining an active social life but avoiding all intimacy—he had orchestrated his existence to keep a lot under wraps. On well-timed occasions, he surrounded himself

[869] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.
[870] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.
[871] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.

with other people and enjoyed being known and noticed, but, now more than ever, he had isolated himself from the people who knew him well. He had deliberately avoided monk-like solitude, but had put himself in a situation where he could be with people without having his privacy violated. Whether he hid his secrets from himself is unknowable, but he certainly kept them out of his art.

What Greenacre apparently fails to recognize, though, is that Mondrian remained an intensely emotional artist. Having previously made clear his hallucinatory delight in natural growth, in sunsets and in the ocean's surface, he now exalted in the immense power of unadorned color and line. Greenacre reports that 'he passionately hated motion of any kind and found people in action the most disturbing of all'—a statement that she has taken from Mondrian's own writing.[872] It is a rare phobia, and may explain why, for all his love of dancing, he only moved his feet and kept his body rigid. Yet even though he eschewed motion in his subjects when he was a figurative artist, disliked observing any fast movement firsthand, and recognised this distaste, as an abstract artist he created motion. The movement within the art he started to make in 1912-13 is more pulsating than directional, but, like music, the work has an ongoing flow. I wish that Greenacre had noted the inconsistency between what Mondrian said and what he did. She would also have done well to discern that even while he avoided movement from "a" to "b", he created circular, internal movement.

How I would have liked to discuss this point with Phyllis Greenacre! I feel she might have found a parallel between that form of motion to self-stimulation, or masturbation. She certainly cottoned on to his unusual hatred for 'people in action.' Would this distinguished psychoanalyst have agreed with me that while he disliked observing 'motion of any kind' enacted by others (an echo of his parents having sex), he generated his own motion, making a terrific sexual energy and euphoric pleasure occur in solitude?

XVIII

The reason I think Phyllis Greenacre is so important in our understanding of Mondrian is that, rather than being like the many art historians who reiterate that Mondrian gradually eliminated the human figure from his art shortly following his move to Paris, in some cases taking us step by step through the move to abstraction without shedding any light on the motivations for Mondrian's strident redefining of himself and his art, the psychoanalyst treats that vital development as integral to everything about him as a human being. And she is alert to every detail of the convection between his painting and his core self. Greenacre points out that 'even immobile cows in flat meadows were sacrificed. He loved flowers but they

[872] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.

must appear singly and not in 'ensemble', i.e., in relation to each other.'[873] The savvy doctor then guides us through the stages of the artist's deeply personal relationship to the representation he now abandoned.

'He turned to trees, painting them at first usually singly, stately, and dignified. Later, they appeared with twisted, tortured limbs as though arrested in a state of agonized motion. He experimented with the effects of light, painting the same scene either by the strongest sunlight or by moonlight. Fascinated for a time by the ever-changing sea and sky, he found that they too suggested more motion than he could tolerate.'[874]

Yet, although she is correct about all that he eliminated from his field of observation—to a neurotic degree by the stage of his life when he could no longer bear to glimpse a single tree, let alone a forest—she again leaves out the concomitant way that he made motion occur in his abstract art. I must repeat that I understand that Greenacre got her idea that 'Mondrian passionately hated motion of any kind' because of what the artist himself said, but this must be qualified: he hated movement outside of the world he was creating. He wanted stillness, and order, all around him, but his was by no means a still art. Physical action was an imperative for Mondrian as long as he could control it and was himself the source.

What is indisputable is that the shifts in Mondrian's art in 1913, his second year in Paris, were the turning point. Phyllis Greenacre did not know Mondrian, was not an art historian, but she has an incredible understanding of the human mind, and of why we do what we do. And she is more astute about Piet Mondrian than anyone else. She pinpoints *Tableau N° 1* and *Tableau N° 2* and other works of 1912 and 13 as seminal to all his subsequent painting, and as the means with which he found his way to a new state of personal balance and happiness that would be present, unflagging, for the rest of his life.

> 'He began to paint walls themselves, first of rather warm reddish brick in patches, perhaps the indistinct walls of a house in the half light in which the right angle of the joinings of the bricks stood out like small right-angled crosses, sometimes embraced by incomplete ovals. Later, the texture of the brick faded and the ovals disappeared while the little crosses became prominent in irregular patterns as though scattered in space, still suggesting motion and emotion. Next, the crosses extended their linear arms to join each other to create rectangles of varying sizes and distribution, each enclosing its own primary color. He is said to have spent hours arranging and rearranging these to form a pattern which would have absolute balance, in which nothing would be loose or open-ended. This search for perfection in both

[873] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.
[874] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 34.

> expression and strong containment of the primordial forces progressed through various stages until it reached the compositions of infinitely precise rectangular forms, for which the painter became famous in his later years.'[875]

I cannot emphasize sufficiently the brilliance of the notion 'strong containment of the primordial forces.' What Mondrian required personally gave his work its immense power. For the containment, while prohibiting those forces from being dangerous or threatening, keeps them, in a manner Mondrian could cope with, combustive. Energy, connection, rhythm, liveliness: all are present in the paintings so beautifully and meticulously organized. And what began in 1913 with *Tableau N° 1* and *Tableau N° 2* would grow only more luminous and charged, the primordial forces as abundant and full of vitality as they are safely positioned.

Art is an unequaled haven!

XIX

As Mondrian settled in on the rue du Départ, the larger world was beginning to discombobulate with developments that would soon lead to the most destructive international war of all time. Throughout continental Europe, a pervasive instability could be felt everywhere one turned, as when a hurricane is heading one's way. Mondrian had no one in his personal life to provide the balance and security that were lacking outside. He was coming to distrust Kickert, the friend who had made it possible for him to be in Paris. Still his neighbour living only on the floor below, previously a supporter in getting Mondrian's work into exhibitions and leading collectors his way, Kickert was, increasingly, a troublemaker. Mondrian's companions like Van Deene and Van Domselaer were fun to be with, and had the charm of youth, but they were not intimates, and Schelfhout had moved back to the Netherlands. Mondrian's anchor was his art.

Moving from the country where everyone else in his family was, he had consciously shifted the course of his life. The isolation and solitude which would have seemed risky and threatening to most people afforded him new contentment. Entering uncharted territory, he streamlined his life to protect himself from the intrusion of unwelcome complexity while making artistic choices that assured his psychological stability. Phyllis Greenacre goes inside his mind:

> 'He stated that he saw with realist eyes past beauty or (ordinary) reality of man, and that pure reality must be painted without the infiltration of *any* subjective feelings or conceptions. Since particular form and natural color evoke subjectivity, he felt he

[875] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 35.

> must reduce his pictures to the elements of form and primary color alone. Ultimately he felt that the only really constant relationship is expressed in the right angle; that the two fundamental forces of nature are expressed in the horizontal and the vertical meeting in the perfect right angle. (Parenthetically one wonders here whether he was making an effort to harmonize night and day.) Space, uncluttered, was the background on which he could create the equivalence of these two factors. He was clearly eradicating the family circle and any of the comforting rounded forms of life and human contact. It is not hard to see that he must have felt the danger of an overwhelming force of aggression in himself and the need of strong containing walls both in life and in his painting.'[876]

Again Greenacre perfectly elucidates the approach to living and working which Mondrian had, in a very different way, undertaken when he fled to the safe harbor Van den Briel offered him in Brabant. In Paris, he managed on his own, but the psychological mechanism, and its effect on his art, was similar.

> 'His paintings seemed to reflect, to an unusual degree, what was going on in his own attempt to live. There was an increasing effort to extricate himself from particular personal relationships and to live in a perfectly balanced cosmic harmony. This seems another form of the rebel's search for a utopian existence. He insistently fled from motion and emotion as though these were the devils of darkness. His studio, bare and painted white, appeared more suitable for a monk or a surgeon than a painter. He could not stand even the intrusion of books.'[877]

The psychoanalyst has no doubts as to the origins of Mondrian's need to live this way and to make his sort of art:

> 'Obviously, this is the story of a talented man who had from childhood struggled against both sexual and aggressive drives. Nor is this strange when one considers that probably from his earliest years he suffered from extreme stimulation. For he was the oldest of five children born to the sternest of Calvinistic fathers, who was a headmaster in the school. The children came in about ten years and there was every chance that this oldest child had multiple primal scene experiences as well as awareness of the birth of the younger siblings, certainly a situation which inevitably

[876] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 35.
[877] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 36.

> would compound Oedipal jealousy, and sibling jealousy and envy. His symptoms themselves bespoke the extremest sensitization to movement and noise; his infantile anger was expressed in his wish to keep all objects, whether animate or inanimate, separated from each other. Not even flowers should be seen with intertwined stems. He seemed to have taken into his body the multiple and unorganized as well as rhythmic motion around him, and to have attempted to convert it into a cosmic rhythm which would be perfect and eternal, and to project this in his painting. His fascination with dancing with his whole body in a state of stiff erectness proclaimed, unknown to him, the displacement of genitality to the total body self.'[878]

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From a completely different perspective, Michel Seuphor observed the same development. Seuphor would only meet Mondrian seven years after his move to Paris, when Mondrian returned there after being stranded in the Netherlands during the First World War, but he was astute in his evaluation of the events that had begun in 1912. 'Mondrian was searching for a style, for a new plastic language, which would give the contemplative gaze repose, rest, and confidence.'[879] The artist did not want that state of grace only in his art, but in every aspect of his being.

The act of painting well-calibrated compositions provided emotional scaffolding. 'It was the simplification of Cubism which set him on his route,' Seuphor observes. To Seuphor, the restraint of the brown-gray palette and the domination of straight lines gave the later phases of Cubism 'a real nobility, which in the works of Mondrian would become singularly more penetrating, almost mystical.'[880] In 1913, interpreting Cubism in his own way, dropping all but the slightest pretense of subject matter, itself neutral and depersonalized, Mondrian had, as Phyllis Greenacre enables us to understand, found safe territory where he became free of his demons.

XX

Phyllis Greenacre's views of Mondrian's emotional development is so rich, so well considered and deeply felt, that it warrants your reading the following pages in their entirety:

> 'Mondrian was a rebel in a life-long struggle with his father, who is described as a sententious tyrant, a Calvinist schoolmaster who wished his son to become a teacher. The boy's determination to

[878] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 38-39.
[879] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 100.
[880] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 100.

be a painter came with puberty, but he succumbed to his father's will to the extent of qualifying to teach drawing. His further decision at twenty to go to the Academy of Fine Arts alienated him from his parents and his home, to which he never returned voluntarily except for the briefest visits.

During the next few years at the Academy, and after, in order to earn his living, he did copies of pictures, illustrations for scientific books, some portraits, and occasional teaching. He was an amiable, friendly young man, markedly shy with women. His appearance was arresting partly because of his large and luminous dark eyes, which are conspicuous in his photographs and in a series of self-portraits. He was then obsessionally worried about possible blindness and according to his younger brother, he tried to deal with this anxiety by ridiculing himself in regard to it.

In this general period there were two break-throughs of wildness in behavior, both of which were symbolically self-destructive. On one occasion while visiting in Cornwall at the invitation of one of his women students, he leaped into the sea from a high overhanging rock. He succeeded in swimming ashore, but fatigue and the immersion brought on a severe attack of pneumonia, from which he recovered slowly. The other eruption of wildness was repeated several times. He painted a number of self-portraits which required his studying his face in the mirror. But when the portrait displeased him, as it usually did, he would destroy it by shooting it with a pistol. A fellow painter who participated in these acts saved one of the offending portraits and wrote on it a quotation which translated means: "So I take the risk of thrusting myself into the world, and I wait calmly until destiny, which eternally pursues us, lifts my desire to the point of self-confidence".

In his journey away from home, Amsterdam had been the first stop and Paris the second. He was then in the stage of seeking relief from the varying shades and combinations of color in nature by adopting the use of primary colors alone. He was also seeking an intellectual style which would be loved for itself alone and eternally. In 1914 he was summoned home by the illness of his father but this visit was lengthened to the duration of World War I, which broke out just at this time.

Perhaps the pressures of the time accelerated the changes going on in him. At this time his renewed interest in the sea brought out the idea of horizontal and vertical forces as the basic and eternal principles of life. As soon as the war was over, he

> returned to Paris where he remained until 1938. This was the end of the period of the first great changes in his painting.'[881]

In this studio on the rue du Départ, Mondrian would now construct and enclose form and animate flat surfaces, with the instruments of painting like a bellows oxygenating a fire.

> 'Throughout these years, he had lived a generally ascetic life, but he made a number of friends, began to publish articles, and to take a definite place in the world of painters. He knew many women, some of whom had been his students. He suffered compulsive infatuations which never lasted. He was intensely fond of dancing and felt it a treat to be taken to a well-known dance hall. Otherwise, he danced alone in his studio with his small red painted phonograph. A friend who watched him considered him ridiculous, was embarrassed, and understood why women did not wish to marry him. When he was approaching sixty and had begun to take dancing lessons, he would pick out the prettiest girl on the dance floor, but was as stiff as a ramrod, attempting only vertical and horizontal movement. He was bitter that his country had banned the Charleston; if this ban continued he would never set foot in the Netherlands again. He thought the Charleston was a 'sporting dance', contrasting it to erotic dances. Since the partners always kept a certain distance from each other and spent so much energy in doing and keeping track of the steps, he was assured they would have no time for thoughts of sex.
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> He had planned to come to the United States, but stopping too long in London en route, he was caught by the Second World War and did not arrive in New York until the fall of 1940. Here his paintings underwent another radical change. The precise black lines, enclosing rectangles of pure color, melted away and were replaced by thicker lines of a succession of small segments of various colors. These were the Broadway Boogie Woogie and the Victory pictures. Whether the Victory was for life or for death is hard to say for he died soon afterward of pneumonia […]
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> He was ultimately unable to live according to the art form he had created, in which motion and emotion would be walled safely into rectangles. But he had only a brief period of freedom before he died.'[882]

Surprisingly enough, in the last two or three years of his life, these purified architectural forms began to break up again. His last two paintings showed

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[881] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 36-37.
[882] Greenacre, 'The Primal Scene', p. 37-39.

varied linear groups of small imprecise forms of assorted colors jostling each other in obvious motion and were labeled by their author, Broadway Boogie Woogie and Victory Boogie. These were painted at the age of sixty-nine in New York in 1941 or 1942.

The psychological processes that began with Mondrian's move to Paris, following his rejection of marriage and domestic life, would determine his personal functioning and the character of his art, regardless of the variations, for the rest of his life.

XXI

Mondrian's inclusion in the Salon des Indépendants that March and Apollinaire's attention to his work had helped establish him in Paris as one of painters whose latest work would be deemed of interest. He was not yet as well-known in Paris as he had been in Amsterdam during the Stedelijk show and in its aftermath, but the big difference in the critical regard of him was that this time the press, even if there was less of it, was on his side. And he was included in group shows with other artists expanding the frontiers of painting. In July, two of his paintings were in an important group show in Munich—Kandinsky and Klee both lived there at the time, and presumably saw them—and, just afterwards, he was in the Erster Deutscher Herbstsalon.[883]

When Mondrian put some of his older paintings into the Moderne Kunstkring's Third Exhibition, which opened that November at the Stedelijk, Kickert was annoyed that Mondrian had sent his most recent work to the German shows instead. This exacerbated Mondrian's growing problems with the man who had paved the way for his move to Paris. By the start of the following year, Kickert would virtually stop speaking to Mondrian. Kickert felt the person he had helped advance had turned disloyal, lacking sufficient interest in their mutual undertaking.[884]

What Kickert did not consider, even if he knew it, was that Mondrian's failure to put recent work into the 1913 Kunstkring show was in part due to his health. In June of 1914, Mondrian would write Schelfhout that the autumn of 1913 had been difficult for him because he had been too ill a lot of the time to paint.[885] He generally made light of the degree to which he was physically unwell, but it is these occasional asides in letters that make clear that Mondrian's prolonged bouts of sickness were a significant factor in his life. What it was specifically that bothered him varied, but he often suffered from intestinal problems and severe colds and flus. Explaining what ailed him, Mondrian often referred back to the bout of pneumonia he

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[883] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 27.
[884] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 104.
[885] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914. RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.

had in 1900, and which he attributed to swimming in Cornwall, as if he were having relapses. This was hardly scientific—either the idea that swimming in cold water causes pneumonia, or that the illness recurs—but it is possible that he had a weak constitution, with little resistance to the flu epidemics that spread through Europe almost every winter. It always took him a long time to recover from colds.

Lifelong, he would try strict new nutritional regimes as a remedy. What he was treating is less precisely known than the various curative diets he would try, which would become obsessional, and, since they often followed the latest trend, are known in detail. The most long-lasting and significant of these regimes would be the Hayes diet, which he would turn to in the 1920s; for now, his main staple was lentils, possibly out of economic necessity as well as their high protein content and lack of fat.

The bout of illness he had at the end of 1913, in making him less productive than usual as a painter, had consequences both for his artistic reputation in the Netherlands and the friendship with Kickert, but also for his relations with others in the Kunstkring circle. Kickert considered him a defector when in truth the problem was his physical condition, not his attitude.[886] Yet there were further issues between Kickert and Mondrian beyond Mondrian's failure to have more new work for the Kunstkring show. By the autumn of 1913, the only interaction between Mondrian and his rich friend who had done so much to foster his reputation was the occasional hello when they happened to be in the same place at the same time. Mondrian accepted the rift as unavoidable. He was not bothered by it; when principles were at stake, they counted more than the perks of the friendship. They disagreed on aesthetic matters; Kickert's insisted his approach, less purely abstract, was the only correct route, and made a fuss because Mondrian broke from representation so completely. Mondrian had not voted for all of Kickert's proposals at a meeting of the Moderne Kunstkring; having spearheaded the new movement, Kickert could not stand the challenge. It was fine with Mondrian, 'for I cannot and will not be friends with him in the long run.'[887] Mondrian did his utmost to preserve harmony in his human relationships, to avoid conflict wherever possible, but this time he was pushed over the edge. Typically, he did not go into battle; he turned the other cheek.

He had reached the same point with the French painter Le Fauconnier, who was one of the minor, but commercially successful, Cubists. 'At any rate, in my opinion, this one is an artist,'[888] Mondrian allowed, deprecating

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[886] 'Mondriaan stuurt zijn werk voor de helft naar rotte tentoonstellingen in Duitsland.' Letter Conrad Kickert to Jan Toorop, no date [second half 1913], as quoted in: Wesselingh, 'Conrad Kickert als voorvechter van het Nederlands modernisme', p. 11.

[887] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.

[888] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.

Kickert by comparison, but he had no wish to maintain relationships with people he disliked.

His handling of Kickert and Le Fauconnier was consistent with his pattern lifelong. Mondrian did not feud with people; he simply severed the ties. He handled disagreements with resignation, not confrontation; there is no evidence of his ever having had a conspicuous conflict with another individual. He had always had this will to avoid disputes. He and his father did not have the same priorities in earlier years, but there are no traces of vituperative communication between them. When the troublesome visitors came to Brabant from Amsterdam, and Van den Briel knocked the gossiping man flat, Mondrian was the least agitated person present. He mainly resented the interruption to his painting. His instinct was always to avoid the wasted time and depletion of energy that occur when people are dominated by their disagreements and frustrations.

This situation with Kickert was unusually complicated, though. Kickert was not just his sponsor, but also his landlord. Mondrian had to deal with the impact of their differences on his everyday life. Since Kickert no longer liked Mondrian's work anymore than he liked Kickert's, Kickert would no longer accept art work as rent payment, which had been their arrangement to date. Mondrian now had to repay his disputatious landlord in francs. Fortunately, he managed to sell to other people the paintings Kickert would previously have accepted as rent, and to send Kickert the cash. But he was unfazed by Kickert's disdain; he had no tolerance for the views of someone 'who actually dares to criticize Picasso.'[889]

It's a telling remark. Mondrian had his quibbles with Picasso, but believed that it was horrid to denigrate such a serious and committed artist in the way that Kickert did. Besides, the rampage that had Kickert keeping Picasso out of Dutch exhibitions, so soon after joining Mondrian in bringing the Spaniard's art to Amsterdam, went against Mondrian's Cubist work as well.[890] Only a year earlier, Kickert had seen to it that Mondrian's work was well positioned alongside that of the leading French painters of the day in an important Amsterdam show. Now the influential man who had been his champion was actively working against him. Kickert's underhand ways regarding both him and Schelfhout came into sharp focus in June of 1914. Mondrian wrote Schelfhout to say that a recent letter from Schelfhout to him had made him feel better than its writer could have imagined. He was immensely relieved by Schelfhout's spirit of camaraderie in that communication, for, until its arrival, he had believed that Schelfhout felt less warmly toward him than was the case. Mondrian may have lived in a form of isolation, but he was keenly alert to the nuances of human relationships. He now realized that, when they lived in the same building in

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[889] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.

[890] For Kickert's attitude on Picasso, see Van Adrichem, *De ontvangst van de moderne kunst*, p. 52-54.

Paris, Schelfhout was 'less friendly' to him 'because of the negative influence of Kickert.'[891] Kickert had been so meddlesome as to have both Mondrian and Schelfhout feel that each was disparaging the other. The letter from Schelfhout was a welcome friendly and praising surprise. 'I will accept that gladly. A little approval and sympathy is thin on the ground these days!'[892]

Even while Mondrian had no truly close friends, he was extremely sensitive to the attitudes of his few supporters as he took his work into new territory. When Schelfhout had departed from his studio on the rue du Départ in order to return to the Netherlands permanently, Peter Alma, another member of the Moderne Kunstkring, took the space over. Alma, too, was getting married, with a Norwegian painter who 'stole Alma's heart and made our Petrus happy!'[893] Mondrian's two friends whose lives were being transformed by marriage formed an alliance. Alma chided Mondrian for seeing nothing of Schelfhout's work when Schelfhout was in Paris. Mondrian's reaction to the critique was a heartfelt determination to make up for the gaff. He had no problem accepting his own mistake and rectifying it; when he wanted to, he could be extremely diplomatic. He sought out Schelfhout's art and wrote him nicely about it. This hastened the improvement in their relationship. Besides, once both had cottoned on the Kickert's shenanigans, they had the bond of people who feel manipulated by a mutual enemy.

Schelfhout now made a concerted effort to help Mondrian. His first move was to try to find new clients in the Netherlands for Mondrian's recent work. At the start of June 1914, Mondrian, delighted to have his new benefactor, calculated his budget for Schelfhout, saying he would probably resign from the Moderne Kunstkring unless Kickert decreased the requirement of a thirty florin contribution. His irritation may have been as much of a factor as his finances, but he was in dire straits. He only needed to sell a single painting out of an exhibition he was currently having at Walrecht in The Hague in order to cover his rent for the next six months, but otherwise he would need another solution, and had no idea what it might be.

With Schelfhout, Mondrian, as always, did not want to take advantage of a friend's kindness. Penurious as he was, he wrote Schelfhout, 'You will accept a sketch of mine later on, I trust.'[894]

Schelfhout did not even mention that possible reward when he responded by presenting his master plan. He would sell some of Mondrian's older work to give him a nest egg. Oblingingly, Mondrian looked around the rue du Départ. He wished he had the inventory to make the concept work, but he did not. All he had in Paris of his earlier art was a single canvas

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[891] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.
[892] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.
[893] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.
[894] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.

of a tree. He told Schelfhout that he would bring it with him when he went back to the Netherlands that August, in two months time. Since he had no other figurative art to offer, he hoped he might sell one of his less popular recent canvases.

It was not financially realistic, though. Except for his handful of astute enthusiasts, there was no one willing to buy the sort of paintings Mondrian was now producing in Paris. He could not imagine how he could make ends meet without having to do another commissioned copy.

On June 12, 1914, Mondrian wrote Schelfhout a rare letter in which he provides a vivid sense of the workings of his mind. Dire as his money problems were, they were not his main concern.

'It was nice of you to write to me, and there are still a few things I should reply to. It seems to me that mix-ups and misunderstandings are to blame for us not having been very helpful to each other in Paris. As my behavior has proved in many cases, I am not a hermit by profession, and I, like you, have to find my own place in life. But an "illusory life" like that of the Kickert circle was not for me, which is why I preferred to stay away altogether.'[895]

Mondrian was utterly clear about what he wanted in human relationships, and what he did *not* want. Human interaction was essential to him, but it had to be with the right people in the right way. He was now determined to approach his emotional needs with the most rational approach possible. He protected himself against the risk of feeling let down, or, worst still, betrayed. And he now lived in a way that prevented him from any personal entanglement that might unbalance him. Never again would he risk the embarrassment and distress of the surprise visitor from Amsterdam who showed up in Brabant in the summer of 1904; nor would he pretend that marriage to a woman was his right course in life.

#

Mondrian's way of life was essential quite outside the human norm not only because of his detachment from other people. Another highly unusual element is that anyone who was a partisan of his work engaged with fantastic devotion in helping him succeed as an artist. Van den Briel had been outside of the artistic orbit, but had devoted himself to Mondrian's being able to work. Theirs was not a friendship of parity; Van den Briel's career as a forester was of little interest to Mondrian, while, in the time when they were together, Van den Briel had taken everything about Mondrian as his main project in life. Schelfhout, too, regarded Mondrian as a master—the original one, the genius. Schelfhout, too, was a professional artist, but put himself in the second tier, while doing all he could do to enable Mondrian not just to survive, but to flourish. Inequality was endemic to Mondrian's friendships. Neither he nor his supporters appeared to notice the imbalance; that's just how it was.

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[895] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.

In all his relationships, Mondrian was the one in charge, the friend who would decide when he and the other person would get together. He was also the troubleshooter who mitigated problems before they got too severe. He allowed to Schelfhout that he was upset because Kickert had told him that Schelfhout regarded him as being lazy because he produced so few paintings. He addressed the issue unabashedly and justified his own slowness. There was no beating around the bush. Kickert had tried to make trouble; rather than being offended, Mondrian took Schelfhout's complaint at face value and explained his work pace, even though Schelfhout probably wished that Mondrian had never heard what he said. Mondrian wrote Schelfhout: 'And in those days I was also having a very hard time searching for my own means of expression, […] while I was seriously searching on my own account, but had little to show for it.'[896]

Mondrian tried to avoid battle, sort things out logically, and ironing out any ruffles. If Schelfhout had an issue with his limited output, they should have a straightforward discussion about it, and also to deal with the malicious way that Kickert quoted one to another. Mondrian gave the precise history. He recalled to Schelfhout that difficulties between the two of them had begun two years earlier when Kickert wrote him a manipulative letter from Zandvoort while Schelfhout was still in Paris. In it, Kickert offered to show Mondrian letters so 'then I would know who was my friend and who was not.'[897] Kickert depicted himself as loyal, while portraying Schelfhout as sniping about Mondrian. For Mondrian, meanwhile, it had been upsetting to learn about the criticism allegedly uttered by someone who lived only a few meters away.

Mondrian admitted that initially, he had been blind to Kickert's chicanery. He had failed, or refused, to recognize that the man who wanted to be the power broker of the circle of Dutch artists in Paris, in charge of everyone else, had deliberately sundered him and Schelfhout apart. 'Besides, he also told me about the time you collapsed against the sofa laughing when you saw my work at the first M.K.K.!'[898] Now in retrospect, Mondrian realized that Kickert had probably fabricated, or at least exaggerated, Schelfhout's derision. Schelfhout's surprising overtures had made him see Kickert's manipulations. Mondrian was blunt about how Kickert's account had made him feel. 'I thought that was unreasonable because it was a very serious piece of work, after all, even though it still needed amendment. Anyway, it often bothered me to notice a sort of disdain on your part.' The reason Schelfhout's disapproval bothered him was not because it lacked

[896] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.
[897] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[898] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70. 'M.K.K.' refers to the Moderne Kunstkring.

loyalty, but 'as I was sure I was onto something with my work, even though the results were not yet satisfactory.'[899]

Mondrian was earnest to a fault. He continues to spell out his reactions to Schelfhout with his usual disarming candor. As always, he focused on himself as the center of his universe, but it was himself as a vehicle for art more than as a social being or someone with personal feelings outside his painting. He wrote to Schelfhout, 'But in spite of everything, I also know you appreciated what I was doing, in a way.'[900]

He was refering to his painting, not to himself—for his painting matters more to him. He recalled that Schelfhout particularly liked what he was doing 'during the blue tree period.' He informs his friend that when one has definite values 'that can't very well change from one moment to the next, which is why I thought it inconsistent of you.' Mondrian then challenged Schelfhout, a devoted Theosophist, for having written that he, Mondrian, was not a true adherent to the faith.

'If you take that to mean what Theosophists are, in general. Nevertheless I consider the teaching of Theosophy to be completely right, and that it actually contributes to clarity in spiritual development. So we are in full agreement on that point. Consciousness-raising strikes me as a first priority for everyone.'[901]

The awareness was vital to the success of his creative work.

In this communication with Lodewijk Schelfhout, Mondrian was the living exemplar of the awareness and candor he advocated in painting. He didn't waste a moment being chatty, nor did he pretend to have any great interest in Schelfhout's life except in relation to his own. Mondrian was almost as determined to have his devotion to Theosophy acknowledged as to have his latest painting respected, but it was because Theosophy permeated his approach to the blank canvas. He disdained Catholicism to Schelfhout as invoking 'something vague, but Theosophy, which is a spiritual science, can never do that.'[902] Mondrian voiced annoyance that his article for the Theosophic Magazine had been rejected, defending his exegesis on Art and Theosophy as 'too revolutionary for them,'—its temerity being the reason they did not publish it.[903]

Yet he was not so doctrinaire that he could not make allowances for differences from his own views. What counted for Mondrian was correctness and honesty, not the choice of style. He wrote Schelfhout, 'we can fully appreciate each other's work and yet each go in a different

[899] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[900] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
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[902] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[903] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.

direction.' This was his relationship with the artist Verhoeven; their work was 'unlike mine and yet we appreciate each other.'[904]

As always, the reality of finances was at the forefront of Mondrian's thoughts even as he addressed spiritual beliefs and artistic values. He was so obsessed that he repeated, verbatim, a detail that had been in the letter he wrote Schelfhout five days previously. He had recently shown his art in Zurich and in Berlin without selling a thing. If only a single painting would sell out of the show in The Hague, he would 'even if it's only to be able to afford the next term!'[905] Otherwise, he did not know what he would do. The reason for being preoccupied was that, even though he was now widely respected as a talented artist of enormous potential, he was still, at age forty-one, at the edge of a financial abyss.

He lived on his own planet, alone with his painting, but he had not forgotten the realities of life—he *could* not, even if he wanted to—and he understood other people's realities even if they no longer pertained to him. Of the woman to whom Schelfhout had been engaged and with whom he was now married, Mondrian tells his friend he 'got a particular sympathetic impression from her.' Mondrian was less kind about others in his and Schelfhout's circle. 'Kickert is *too* superficial to feel true friendship for anyone,' he declares. Peter Alma was more worthy, but not by much: 'I think *friendship* in the deeper sense is not something you can expect from him either.'[906] Everything was a matter of measure; he calibrated human qualities as he did lines.

XXII

When he was with other people, Mondrian did not so much converse as hold forth. Either that, or he was silent. In the text he started writing in 1913 about his theories on art, he communicated with the same unawareness of the party on the receiving end as in his human interactions. He makes one declarative statement after another, as if he is tone-deaf to his reader's needs.

Mondrian reiterates his main points multiple times, apparently impervious to how tiring and irritating this is for his reader. His language has none of the conciseness or grace of his paintings. While his paintings, increasingly abstract, became cleaner and more refined and elegant than ever, his verbal narratives are repetitious, confusing, and heavy. They have fascinating ideas at their core, but their awkward language impedes easy access to the brilliant theories they attempt to articulate.

In 1913, Mondrian began to write an article on Art and Theosophy. It became almost as much of a preoccupation as his painting, even though it

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[904] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[905] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[906] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.

would never find a large audience. He now went further with the ideas he had presented in his early letter to Bremmer. Following the move to Paris, Mondrian made it his practice to give his views on the purposes of painting and on much else in human existence, and this essay, to which he devoted most of his evenings in the winter of 1913-14, and which had been requested by the Theosophical Society for their journal, *Theosophia*, was his chance to have them in print. The work on this text preoccupied him to such an extent that eventually it started to take precedence over his painting, occupying his daylight hours as well as the evenings in March of 1914, even as the longer days and start of springtime might have encouraged him to paint more. Driven by a compulsive need to put his ideas into words and spread his gospel in print, he did not mind the sacrifice.

The article was scheduled to appear at the end of April. Mondrian had a sneaking suspicion that the editors would consider it—the words are Mondrian's own, in a letter to Bremmer – 'too anarchistic.'[907] Nonetheless, he could hardly wait for its publication, even if it was sure to engender controversy. To Schelfhout, he was proud that his writing might be too far-fetched even for people who purported to be open-minded: 'That may speak well for it.'[908]

Anticipating a range of responses to his revolutionary ideas, when, at the last minute, he was informed that it would not be published, Mondrian was devastated. The rejection stung much as his failure to secure the Prix de Rome. At age forty-one, Mondrian was not often thrown by failure. But on the rare occasions when he let down his guard and was riding high as he imagined his life changing before his eyes, and then felt a door slammed in his face, he was shattered.

The essay was never published elsewhere, and the manuscript has been lost. It is unlikely that Mondrian kept a copy after submitting it, which would have required typing with carbon paper—difficult when one habitually makes a lot of changes and corrections. He presumably threw out earlier drafts as soon as he had advanced beyond them, just as he glady lost the preliminary stages of a painting into the ether as he revised them. To horde was in complete opposition to his simple way of life, the empty studio. When he moved to Paris, he had discarded the shining copper, the souvenirs of Brabant, the gifts he had received there. All that he kept from his past were the degree certificates from the Dutch Academy and the photo of Madame Blavatsky.

It is likely that the text Mondrian described as being too radical to publish was simply too long and badly written. In any event, we can be sure that its fundamental idea was the quest for universal values, and the need to

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[907] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, April 8 1914, as quoted in Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 15.

[908] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70, as quoted in Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 15.

pare down the complexity of every day life to find them. Mondrian's life had assumed a new purpose, and the writing and painting were steps in the same direction; he craved beauty, and felt it depended on eradicating all impediments to simplicity.[909]

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Six years after his essay was turned down by his fellow Theosophists, Mondrian would write his new colleague Theo Van Doesburg, 'I am glad criticism is […] completely against us. Otherwise we would have nothing left to do.'[910] Negative feedback, unless it was an all-out diatribe by someone like Van Eeden, usually spurred him on. His standards and artistic goals were his own; he scrupulously avoided being influenced by the tastes of others, and relished being at odds with the mainstream.

Yet at that crucial moment in 1914 when his essay was rejected, he took pause to consider why. His paintings had a few admirers, but they, too, were generally unpopular. He wrote Bremmer that people generally considered his 'my work to be rather vague: at best it is said to remind them of music.' This did not bother him–as long as it did not mean that it was therefore 'outside the domain of visual art. Because my purpose in constructing lines and colour combinations on a flat plane is to visualize *beauty per se* as consciously as possible.'[911] His goal was to create a new vision that might theoretically appeal to all people in all times and places, but he had no expectations that its recognition and appreciation would be immediate. Once he calmed down after the rejection of his essay, he resumed work at his usual pace, and this would mean writing as well as painting.

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Bremmer was the individual Mondrian considered best equipped to understand him in this period when he was eliminating representation and progressing toward its complete absence. As a critic, collector, and art advisor, Bremmer was more progressive and open to the new than most people in any of those domains. After buying *Tableau N° 1* and *N° 3* at the Moderne Kunstkring exhibition, at the start of 1914 the independent connoisseur declared his wish to publish them in an article in *Visual Arts – Beeldende Kunst* – a monthly magazine he owned.

Bremmer's support renewed his courage and confidence. Here was someone sufficiently attuned to his goals that he could explain what he was trying to achieve and his method for doing so, knowing that he would be understood and, additionally, that his ally might buy paintings that the

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[909] Hans Janssen claims that Mondrian kept working on the artcile until 1917, when it forms the basis of his first articles in *De Stijl*. Janssen, *Mondrian and cubism*, p. 56.

[910] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 17 1920, as quoted in Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 394.

[911] Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914. RKD #,0613 inv. nr 19.

majority of rich people would have considered as marks of his being immoral or insane. He wrote his sympathetic patron, 'For me the architecture of the Ancients is the greatest art of all. It is my belief that it is possible, by means of horizontal and vertical lines that are constructed *consciously* but without *calculation* in a highly intuitive way, and brought to harmony and rhythm - it is my belief, then, that it is possible, with these basic forms of beauty (supplemented if necessary with lines of different orientation or even curved lines) to arrive at a work of art that is as forceful as it is true.'[912] At few other times in his life would Mondrian be as succinct and clear in declaring his purposes and method.

He then made a statement which I consider to be of the greatest importance if we are really to understand Mondrian and dispel the errors so often repeated about him. 'Nature (or the visible) inspires me, arousing in me the emotion that stimulates creation, no less than for any other painter, but I want to approach truth as closely as possible: I therefore abstract everything until I attain the essential of things (though still their outward essential!). I am convinced that, precisely by *not trying to express anything determinate*, one expresses what is most determinate: truth (the all-embracing).'[913] When later in life, Mondrian would be seen as nature's foe, and the myth developed that he hated anything that grew, people failed to see that "nature (or the visible)", at the same time that he ceased representing it in his work, was at his core.

So too were the qualities of ancient architecture he perceived so passionately. In a new and original voice, Mondrian would maintain the clarity and rightness of the Parthenon and Delphi, the pairing of spontaneity and absolutism that, even in buildings he would never see, epitomized human achievement.

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[912] Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914. RKD #,0613 inv. nr 19, as quoted in Holtzman and James, *Collected Writings,* p. 14.

[913] Letter Mondrian to H.P. Bremmer, January 29, 1914. RKD #,0613 inv. nr 19, as quoted in Holtzman and james, *Collected Writings,* p. 14.

PART III

Back in the Netherlands 1914-1919

I

On Saturday, July 25, 1914, Mondrian left Paris to go visit his father in Arnhem and then see the exhibition of his own work at W. Walrecht's gallery in The Hague.[914] It was an important show for him because his latest works from Paris were shown there, and he hoped desperately to sell at least one work out of it in order to fund the upcoming months in Paris. From The Hague he intended to go to Amsterdam to catch up to friends. Then he would proceed to Domburg; even though he no longer painted the dunes and sea in recognizable form, they continued to inspire him.

He was in good spirits. By the time he reached The Hague, his show there, his first in a commercial gallery, had already done better than he had dared to imagine.[915] Six of the pioneering compositions he had painted in Paris over the preceding few months had sold at the opening and in the course of the following days. Helene Kröller-Müller had bought *Composition No. II*, and Bremmer had bought *Composition No. X* and *Composition No. XII*. It was not surprising that these devotees of his new style of painting lapped up the latest canvases, but the asthonishing news was that a man previously unknown to Mondrian, the Remonstrant Minister H. van Assendelft, who lived in Gouda, had purchased three paintings.[916]

Minister Van Assendelft had already proved himself a courageous collector of art most people failed to understand when he bought an important Kandinsky composition of 1913 when the paint was barely dry. But his purchase of three new Mondrian canvases—*Compositions V*, *VII*, and *XIV*—was courageous. The show had been bitterly attacked in *De Amsterdammer*, a major weekly paper and one of the few to cover it. The well known art critic Albert Plasschaert had written: 'The content has no virtue […] The work presented here is restless without being arousing. It is not coarse; that is the only positive thing that one can say about it. Mondrian has never really been a strong painter.[917]

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[914] 'According to the records from the Laren municipal registry, dated April 10, 1916, he [Mondrian] must have arrived in the Netherlands on Saturday, July 25.' Joosten, *CR II*, p. 106.

[915] For a reconstruction of the Walrecht show, see: Janssen, *Mondrian and Cubism*, p. 69-145..

[916] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 105.

[917] Plasschaert, 'Tentoonstellingen 2. Mondriaan.', in: *De Amsterdammer. Weekblad voor Nederland* 38(1914)1933. As quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 106.

Having read that put-down, Mondrian was much more thrilled when he walked into Walrecht's gallery and discovered that six paintings had been sold. He also had a first encounter with his new patron in the small gallery so vital to modern art in the Netherlands' elegant city.

Born in 1875 in Rotterdam, Van Assendelft was three years Mondrian's junior. As a vicar, in a community where few people would normally have had such progressive artistic taste, currently serving as preacher at the Remonstrant Community of Gouda, he had clout. He was so astute as an observer of art that, having initially seen Kandinsky's work in 1912 in Rotterdam, he had contacted Kandinsky in Munich the following year, which was when he acquired Kandinsky's most recent large and bold composition. Van Assendelft also bought a work by the bold and lively young German expressionist Franz Marc, whose dynamic paintings of animals give them a wonderful cosmic force; that acquisition would become all the more significant when Marc died as a soldier only a couple of years later, stopping short at a tragically young age the career of a painter surely destined to become all the greater with time.[918]

Van Assendelft was a friend of Dop Bles, a poet and bookseller and writer/critic, eleven years younger that Mondrian, who worked at Hachette in Paris and was a friend of Mondrian's. Either Bles or Bremmer may have been the person who got Van Assendelft into the exhibition at Walrecht's. However he came to it, it makes sense that Van Assendelft was so receptive. As a Remonstrant, he opposed the strict Calvinism with which Mondrian had been brought up. The forward-thinking minister believed, rather, in the Five Articles of Remonstrance, which emphasized the responsibility of human beings for their own actions. Van Assendelft's beliefs went against the Calvinist faith that absolved people of the need to take charge of their own sinfulness or its lack. Mondrian had in common with Van Assendelft both what they rejected and what they embraced. He was delighted to spend time with the Minister.

Yet even as he was enjoying himself, Mondrian intended to be back at home in France some three weeks after leaving there. He felt renewed by the new life he had begun only two and a half years earlier, and was eager to develop further once he got back to Paris. He had no idea that it would be five years before he could return to France. Or that Van Assendelft's offer to have him find refuge in his home in Gouda would have such meaning, even if he chose to decline the generous offer.[919]

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[918] Joop M. Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 172-173.

[919] 'Gaarne zoude ik van Uwe invitatie willen gebruik maken, doch ik heb reeds in verschillende plaatsen besproken te logeeren.', letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, August 28 1914, quoted from Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 178.

Michel Seuphor gives the episode of the start of the trip—the son's visit to his father—and subsequent events, a dramatic twist. Seuphor describes Pieter Mondriaan as gravely ill, with Mondrian being summoned to his bedside at his father's place of retirement in Arnhem and dutifully rushing there. Mondrian, in Seuphor's narrative, closes up the studio he was renting from Kickert, packs only a few essentials as one does on an emergency trip, and heads off, unprepared for anything but devotion to an ill parent. Seuphor makes his account all the more touching by depicting the younger Mondrian as nobly putting his struggles with his father behind him.[920]

We will never know whether Seuphor got this version of history, either in its entirety or at least in part, from Mondrian himself. It has become mythic, but this is all sheer invention.

Mondrian's letters of 1914 prove all this a fallacy. What Seuphor would turn into the emergency that has become a major element in Mondrian's incorrect life story was in fact a careful organized journey the artist had anticipated and planned well in advance. On June 7, Mondrian had written Schelfhout that he would deliver an early sketch to him in August 'because I will be in Holland.'[921] He already knew enough about the details of the trip over two months before embarking on it so that five days later, when he again wrote Schelfhout, he informed his friend that when he made that anticipated visit in August, he would not be able to spend the night, because he had too much else to do.[922] Moreover, when he did get to the Netherlands, his father was not in the retirement home where Seuphor places him, but still in the house to which he and Mondrian's mother had moved, and where their daughter still cared for him.[923] And he probably was not even ill.

The war indeed caught Mondrian by surprise, but the reason he did not recognize that there were serious dangers threatening peace all over Europe, causing sufficient havoc to make travel impossible, was because he was not interested in what was happening in the world, not because he had responded to an urgent call that made him overlook reality.

Of course there is more drama in making Mondrian the victim of his father's needs, and portraying the artist's qualities of forgiveness in offering comfort to the tyrant, which is the slant Seuphor has given the world about Mondrian with his dominating parent, than in telling it as it was.

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Michel Seuphor uses the 1914 trip, and the alleged emergency that made it necessary, to elaborate on the image of Mondrian as the rebellious oldest child, engaged in a battle that would be his psychological formation.

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[920] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 113.
[921] Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 7 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 68.
[922] 'In Aug. kom ik jelui opzoeken, maar ik zal geen tijd hebben te logeeren.' Letter Mondrian to Schelfhout, June 12 1914, RKD #0278, inv. nr 70.
[923] Mali, *Pieter Cornelis*, p. 34.

'Throughout his youth he had fought a violent struggle against his father's influence,' Seuphor writes, in presenting Mondrian's mind-set as he hurried back to the ailing Pieter Mondriaan. Mondrian's self-anointed posthumous spokesman would have us believe, and has established as givens, that everything was a reaction to the absolutism of the old man: Mondrian's 'spontaneous sympathy for the Catholic peasants of Brabant' was 'no doubt' a reaction 'against Calvinist rigidity,' and that 'Theosophy had also been, in the main, an escape from paternal influence.'[924]

Seuphor is on a rampage. And I want to reiterate that what makes it so significant that this is not simply the case of a single source putting its own slant on the life of one of the most inventive, groundbreaking artists of all time, a painter who expanded the horizons of visible, soul-penetrating beauty worldwide, for all people. Seuphor, being for decades the one and only source on Piet Mondrian, the accepted authority on an artist who had revealed next to nothing about himself to most people and for whom, therefore, his longtime associate was considered the single, infallible authority, established the Mondrian mythology that has, since the 1950s and now, become rock solid. It falls into the category of one of Carl Sandberg's 'Four Stumbling Blocks to Truth,' all to familiar to me because my own father taught them to my sister and me as the fundament of wisdom: 'reliance on unworthy authority.'

To drive home the simplistic, and dubious, notion of the father-son conflict as the basis of Mondrian's formation, and the painful irony of the reason Mondrian was trapped in the Netherlands for five years, Seuphor quotes Albert van den Briel as saying that Pieter Mondriaan 'was sententious, forbidding, and imposed his stern will on everyone. He was frankly disagreeable.' Alongside this information, he announces his theme in bold type in the margin of his book: 'Authoritarian father'. He bolsters the information from Van den Briel by saying that Van den Briel 'had often seen' Mondrian's father.[925]

It is unlikely that Albert van den Briel ever met Mondrian's father. Van den Briel initially knew Mondrian in Amsterdam, where there is no evidence of Pieter Mondriaan visiting. In Brabant, as far as we know, Mondrian saw no one in his family. The impressions the young forester had of Mondrian's father were based, presumably, on what Mondrian himself said about him—of enormous importance, certainly, if indeed that was how Mondrian spun his father to his young friend—but not on firsthand observation.

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The reason to dispute the black and white myth of the authoritarian father and the rebellious son is not just because it has become accepted on such a widespread basis. To see someone perpetually in reaction to the parent of his own sex in turn colors views on the person's subsequent emotional

[924] All Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 113.
[925] All Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 113.

development, his sexuality, and, in Mondrian's case, on aspects of his art-making. My sense of the facts depicts a much more complex relationship. Mondrian's father set that studio space aside for him in Winterswijk; rather than prevent his son from studying art with Braet von Überfeldt, he facilitated it; and he made it easy for Mondrian to set himself up in Amsterdam in order to go to the Art Academy, and persisted in helping his son get a royal stipend. Then Pieter did the drawing for the large religious demi-lunette which Piet painted, and which won such praise when he, Pieter Sr. explained it, at the anniversary of the school in Winterswijk. Besides, it was Pieter's brother who taught Mondrian to paint, with everyone spending the summer together in the family house. And Pieter Mondriaan himself made art. He may have been tough and opinionated; he was not a heathen despot.

Seuphor nonetheless describes Mondrian as being the complete opposite of 'this authoritarian parent' for whom, by going to his bedside, he would inadvertently sacrifice his preferred way of life for the next five years. 'He himself was of a very different nature; very attentive to the ideas of others, rather silent, and always reasonable in discussion; he was given to phrases like: "Doesn't it seem to you that," "Don't you think that," "Perhaps on reflection," and it took a lot more to made him depart from his habitual amiability."[926] The mild manners are corroborated by almost everyone who met Mondrian, but they did not prevent his being aloof at some times and his pontificating at others, as we have learned from firsthand sources lesser-known than Seuphor. He also had a lack of emotional engagement with others which, in spite of his genuine pleasantness, was disconcerting. Piet may have presented his views without his father's fire and grimstone, but he shared Pieter's absolute stance about things, the totality of his conviction and the unwillingness to consider compromise. Like his father, he would more than once go from being at the forefront of a new movement to severing ties with it. In conversation, his voice was hesitant, but his actions were definitive.

Mondrian's art may to a substantial degree have been a reaction to internal conflicts, a need for the joy and balance he could not find outside the studio, but it was ambivalence—a mix of deep affinity combined with a sense of their differences—about his father, rather than hostility, that was countered by his assured and joyous compositions. It is a mistake to see him simply as reacting *against* his very strong parent.

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The event which kept Mondrian from returning to Paris was the German invasion of Belgium, which began on August 4.

Belgian neutrality had been guaranteed ever since the Treaty of London was signed by Prussia in 1839, and confirmed in 1907 by the German Empire at The Hague Conference. Mondrian was not alone in believing that

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[926] All Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 113.

the Germans would keep their promises. When the German Chancellor, Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg, announced, without advance warning that the treaty of 1839 was nothing but a worthless scrap of paper, and acted accordingly, all but his fellow insiders in the German High Command were taken by surprise. To put themselves in an optimal position to outflank the French Army and push their way toward Paris, the German troops had entered Belgium suddenly and with astonishing force. They immediately killed some six thousand Belgian citizens, destroyed over twenty-five thousand homes, and forced one and a half million of Belgians, a fifth of the people in the country that considered itself neutral, to flee.[927]

Train travel through Belgium came to a halt. There was no way that Mondrian could get back to Paris. Technically, he might have traveled through Germany, as long as the Netherlands remained neutral—which it did more successfully than Belgium throughout the war—but all normal service was disrupted.

Mondrian was desperate to return to the studio where he was still in the process of painting several canvases that he considered his most advanced compositions to date. According to Seuphor, Mondrian decided he would make most of the journey by sea. He hatched a plan to sail to England first, and from there to take a second boat to Le Havre. His friends in Amsterdam wisely convinced him that the trip was too dangerous.[928] In an interview with James Johnson Sweeney Mondrian declared that it was his family who was upset by the thought of his departure.[929] In any case, he had no choice but to stay in the Netherlands and leave the unfinished canvases in Paris until he could safely get back to them. To continue with the new method of painting he had developed in France, he would have to start anew without any of his current work around as a reference.

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Even if Mondrian had been able to wend his way back to Paris, there would have been no way for him to work as usual. Everyday life in the French capital had, overnight, become fraught by danger and anxiety. Other major artists would make the war, and the mental state it induced, a major component of their art, but Mondrian had more than the usual need for calm in his surroundings so as to maintain the equanimity essential in his art. Even though he had not intended to be back on his home turf for more than a few weeks, and felt unexpectedly stuck in the Netherlands, sorry to be cut off abruptly from his new world, he was, for the time being, better

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[927] See for instance John Keegan, *The First World* War, Hutchinson, London 1998; Max Hastings, *Catastrophe, Europe Goes to War 1914*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 2013; Ian Kershaw, *To Hell and Back: Europe, 1914-1949*, Viking Press, New York 2015.

[928] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 114.

[929] James Johnson Sweeney, 'Piet Mondrian', in: *Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 12(1945)4, p. 5. (Reprinted in James Johnson Sweeney, *Piet Mondrian*, Museum of Modern Art, New York 1948.)

off outside of France. Other modernist blow-ins to Paris flourished in the turmoil that lay ahead—when Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, the future Le Corbusier, witnessed aerial bombardment from the Pont des Arts, he was so riveted to the spectacle that he refused to enter the safety of the cellars to which everyone else rushed for shelter; Léger similarly, was energized artistically by the force of military action—but Mondrian was constitutionally unfit for havoc.[930]

Mondrian was, rather, someone who put on blinders to what did not affect him directly. For him, in the neutral Netherlands, it would be as if the war was not even taking place, except in his memory as a disruption to the new life he had begun to carve out for himself. The situation in Europe required a slight shifting of course, a reorganization, but nothing worse. He would be better able to focus completely on his work, even if he didn't know where he would live from one month to the next, and often lacked studio space, than if he had his calm interrupted by air raid sirens.

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This was how Mondrian functioned in general, not just in relation to issues of war and peace. He assiduously sought to avoid disturbances to his focus on the universal. When he had broken off his wedding engagement only three year earlier, it had been a giant step toward the isolation from complexity that he knew would only disturb his chances for equanimity. He had no taste for disputes, and, even though he would never compromise his values and would hold his own with utmost force, he was determined to avoid the time-wasting intrinsic to conflict, whether it is within one's self or comes from the outside.

This will never to be distracted from his singular focus on his own art differentiated Mondrian from most of his modernist colleagues, who devoted a lot of their time and energy to group efforts or art education. When the future founder of the Bauhaus, Walter Gropius, lay buried in rubble on the battlefield—the only soldier in his regiment to survive an enemy explosion during which a building came down on their heads—he became tough-skinned enough to endure and manage the rages of opposing factions at the new art school he would soon run; Gropius was not just a warrior, but a tough one.[931] Mondrian was inclined neither to military action nor to running an educational institution. He had seen his father deal with the divisiveness inherent to idealistic movements and the feuding that is inevitable when factions develop in opposition to one another; he would never put himself at risk for similar troubles. He would in his own future, on rare occasion, complain about colleagues who disappointed him—and, most especially, fault Theo van Doesburg when what had seemed like their perfect marriage of minds ended—but he was never one of those people who obsessed about who or what troubled him. To make art work as

[930] Weber, *Le Corbusier*, p. 145-146.
[931] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 24-25.

transcendent as he desired, Mondrian needed a peaceful ambiance. He always managed to preserve it, whatever hurdles life threw in his way—and this was not to be the only occasion when international war uprooted him and he managed to inure himself to the effects of upheaval.

The return to the Netherlands was not Mondrian's plan, but it afforded him, over the next five years, in a time period when most Europeans were struggling simply to stay alive, to continue to make art and push himself in new directions. In spite of its being the opposite of his intentions, Mondrian benefited from being in a pocket of relative order in a discombobulated world. Always the exemplar of rationalism, with its network of canals and the buildings consistent in scale and proportion, where even the prostitutes follow the rules of the state, during wartime the Netherlands continued to inspire a feeling that all could be managed. Nature remained under control there; the tulips were kept in rows; the vegetable crops on reclaimed land were neatly planted as always. For centuries, this country of gridded towns and straight canals crisscrossing its flat surface had embodied human reason; the German invasion of Belgium, and its further progress, did not alter that. Mondrian's safe harbor during wartime was as true a haven as he could have hoped for.

Could Mondrian have become the painter he was if the homeland to which he returned had a more dramatic landscape of mountain peaks or a jagged coastline? Would he have been who he was if he came from a culture where people routinely shout and roar and lose control? Could a Mediterranean country, or any other place where a high emotional pitch is the norm, have produced him, or rescued him now? Even after he moved to France, the neutrality, and placidness, endemic to Dutch life, was part of him. On the one hand, he sought the extremes: in the originality and beauty of his art, in quotidian existence unlike anyone else's. On the other, the Dutch will neither to instigate aggression nor actively fight against it, were, in spite of his total independence, essential to who he was.

II

Initially, once Mondrian realized he would not be able to return to Paris as planned, he had no idea how long it would be before he could do so. Not that he had ever intended to leave the Netherlands only a few days after arriving at his father's house in Arnhem, the way Seuphor and scores of other art historians maintain, but, with the outbreak of war and his awareness that he would not get back to Paris either by train through the Netherlands or Germany, or a triangular boat journey via England, he no longer stuck to his planned schedule, which would have had him in Domburg in mid-August. We cannot chart precisely the ad hoc way in which he located himself during the unplanned stay, but for someone who preferred to live alone, and normally organized his days with great regularity

and exactly the way that suited him, Mondrian was resilient, and essentially uncomplaing, once he had no choice but to alter everything in his life. He took the situation in stride, and simply set about doing what was most expedient to reorganize his life.

Still, he wrote a postcard to Dop Bles and Bles's wife (as usual, Mondrian addressed his letter to a close friend so as to include the friend's spouse as well; he would do this with Theo van Doesburg and Harry Holtzman and others, but, except in the case of Ben Nicholson, where he was also close to Ben's first wife Winifred and second wife, Barbara Hepworth, both women artists, the 'chers amis' was more simply Mondrian's tactfulness in acting as if the friend's spouse counted to him, his notion of correct form, than true feeling) ten days after arriving at his father's house in Arnhem—meaning he had outstayed the five he planned—saying how 'annoying' the war was. 'For my art, the war is not going to be a joyous turn of events.'[932] He said he would stay about one more week—he made no mention whatsoever of his father being ill, further corroborating the idea that it was either Seuphor's or Mondrian's own invention many years later—and just said he was with his family. He made clear that he missed his 'cher Paris,' and came atipically close to a lament when he wrote a follow-up postcard from Amsterdam saying he was sorry ever to have left. He believed that Dop and his wife could stay in Paris, meanwhile, even as foreigners. Meanwhile, he, at least, felt more free now that he had moved in with Louis at Ringdijk 55. 'Happily, now I am free!'[933] At the family house, he had felt like a prisoner, and had even warned Bles to be careful about anything he said in a postcard he sent there—although one has no idea what he feared what might be said, or read by his father or sister, his only explanation for the warning being 'je suis en famille'—which he no longer considered a factor when he was with his brother.

In any event, his written communication to his poet friend, whose real name was 'Adolf' but was better served by the 'Dop' that suited his informality and modernity as a writer—soon came to an end because, although Mondrian did not understand why, Bles, too, moved to the Netherlands. While it was not inadvertent in his case, he made the choice because had become such a difficult place to live as the war intensified.

The most urgent matter for Mondrian once he was settled at his brother's was to make arrangements for the unsold paintings that were still in The Hague following the end of his exhibition at Walrecht, because, for the time being, they could not be shipped back to Paris. On August 28, Mondrian wrote his new patron, the Reverend Van Assendelft, asking him if he could store any of these paintings. He assumed that this would be only

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[932] Postcard Mondrian to Dop Bles, August 1914 [written in French, from Arnhem], RKD #0613 inv. Nr 18.

[933] Postcard Mondrian to Dop Bles, August 1914 [written in French, from Amsterdam], RKD #0613 inv. Nr 18.

for a brief period of time—Mondrian had no sense that the war might escalate—and asked Van Assendelft to take care of shipping the work back to Paris as soon as the route was reopened. Unfazed by all that was now required for his own safety and that of his artwork, he gave as his own temporary address that of his brothers on Ringdijk 55.[934]

By the end of September, he realized it would be longer than he thought before he could get back to Paris. He went to Domburg; if he was stuck in the Netherlands, at least he could be soothed by the beauty of the sea. Friends who had a spare room took him in. Mies Elout-Drabbe and her family were the first to put him up, and then, Bine de Sitter had him stay in her house on the Zuidstraat.[935] In Domburg, there were other people he enjoyed seeing. Among them Jacoba van Heemskerck and her friend Marie Tak van Poortvliet, the collector with the splendid estate near the resort. Mondrian also spent time with his old friends Jan Toorop and his daughter Charley.

But a lot was different from how it had been before he had moved away from the Netherlands three years earlier. Previously, his work—on the surface—had been similar to Toorop's, and also to Jan Sluijters's. Even though he was a more authoritative and subtle artist, he had been part of a group with them, often having his work alongside theirs in exhibitions. Now, in the shifts that had occurred when he was in Paris, he was making art in a completely different vein from his former colleagues. In Paris, he had to become part of a new movement, even if he was not exactly like his fellow Cubists; in the Netherlands, he no longer fit in. He now had far less in common with Toorop and the others since they were still painting pretty much the same way as always. But they were agreeable company, and made Mondrian feel entirely welcome in his new milieu.

The upheaval in his life, the lack of a home base, and his new position as an outsider, made Mondrian focus more, not less, on his painting. In the late summer and early autumn of 1914, his life having taken this dramatic turn diametrically opposite his intentions for it, Mondrian produced some of his most breathtaking work to date. His series of large drawings of a pier in the ocean had a force of life to them, qualities of the world that would endure no matter what was shattered by the horrors of the war that was wrecking havoc inland. Thrust into unusual circumstances, Mondrian focused on the sea unaffected by the vagaries of current events. The side of the ocean Mondrian depicted was now neither stormy nor threatening as it had been in some of his paintings four and five years ealier. Rather, it was a world all its own: a calm and soothing force.

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[934] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, August 28 1914, in Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 178.

[935] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 106. Cf. Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 178.

For years, I have never understood why he included the pier in these pictures. I have found it jarring, an unwelcome interruption. The sea, and the oval encasing it, have the grace and perfection of the best Braque still-lifes. Why, then, must there be this crude geometric form intruding? Why do we need a reminder of a rough wooden blank, of the means by which people access their boats?[936]

It is because Mondrian is such a BIG painter. He stops at nothing. He was having the experience of being manmade in the sea of life, of defining himself in regard to the world he was penetrating: a world infinitely vast, unpredictable, greater and more lasting than any of us. He entered it with the force of sexual entry (scream if you want, but consider it, please). He was a human being who had taken full charge of himself, who had strength and energy, and he would realize his force to its apogee.

This is what it means, at its best, to be human. One is like the pier—awkward, primitive, but succeeding in one's role—pushing forward in the incomprehensible vastness that was here many millennia before us and will be here, we assume, into the millennia afterwards.

I am not suggesting that this is, consciously, why Mondrian painted the pier. But, at the very least, even if he was unaware of why he was doing so, this was the reason.

To accentuate what was placid and outside time, Mondrian applied his extraordinary imagination in his rendering of the sweep of ocean before him. His had developed a completely original voice, a method that no longer bore traces of anyone else's influence. The technique he had invented was stunningly effective. With horizontal dashes somewhat longer than the vertical ones that intersect them or rise through the interstices between them, these compositions from 1914 manage, at the same time that they are nearly totally abstract, to suggest the sea and a navigable wooden expanse extending into it. Mondrian furthered the success of his new means of articulation by surrounding this delicate flurry of short straight lines in an oval that appears to caress it but that also leaves it floating in the air. The pure whiteness that remains outside the oval form while encompassing the composition, and extends into the corners, adds an ineffable grace to the whole. The use of the oval form, which Picasso and Braque had made a major element of Cubism and was based on centuries-old tradition in French painting, is a superb example of Mondrian's ability to employ the

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[936] As Carel Blotkmamp has pointed out, there are two interpretations of the vertical line: either a breakwater (as one can find near Domburg) or the pier at Scheveningen (a place nearby The Hague). Blotkamp prefers the identification with the pier, because 'what is of particular interest here is the fact that if Mondrian did indeed portray the Scheveningen Pier, rather than a breakwater in Domburg, then that must mean that he was countering a motif from nature – the sea – with a modern cultural element.' Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction*, p. 84-87.

most appropriate elements of the tried and true while applying them with complete adventurousness.

He was not in Domburg for long, but, in the little time he was there, he made five oversized drawings and one oil on canvas. The tumult of his life had caused him to latch on to something of rich serenity, and he adhered himself to it as if to eliminate all intrusion. While western civilization was being ripped to shreds, Mondrian homed in on a world that was eternal.

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Not far south of where Mondrian sat on the dunes overlooking the pier and sea, Belgian citizens were being massacred, their houses burned. Mondrian's few personal possessions—other than the lightweight clothes he had packed for the trip north—and all of his recent art were inaccessible, at least for the time being. His brothers and sister and father were close by—except for Willem, who was in South Africa—but their presence had little meaning for him, even if he lived with Louis. Mondrian had no sense of when he would get back to the place that he now considered his lifelong home. His exile was all the more difficult because of the inability ever to know what lay ahead.

Most people would scarcely have functioned.

Looking at the sea, feeling its rhythm and patterns, determining the perfect, abbreviated artistic vocabulary to evoke its regularity and constancy, he tried to wrest meaning out of existence in some very general way. The current state of the world had little importance to him. What happened in his daily life also had minor meaning. Little more than a decade earlier, his personal life, the details of his living conditions, and his own psyche had preoccupied him—in the period when he was joining strike lines and aligning himself with the anarchists who hoped to improve the lot of the poor and change the world. Once he fled to Brabant, however, he had begun to transform himself. As if proceeding from one stage to another as he had depicted them in *Evolution,* he cast personal needs—material, sexual—aside.

He had not arrived at his state of resolution instantly. But by 1914, the urgency with which he had departed from Amsterdam in 1903, and the anxiety with which he juggled Eva and Greta and Aletta and Nell in the spring of 1909, the inner tumult with which he had fled his marriage plans in 1912, all belonged to the past. Just as he had, in his art, moved to a different plane, he had left aspects of the earthbound in every aspect of his being.

III

In the first of the two small sketchbooks that Harry Holtzman found after Mondrian died, there was a remarkable series of spontaneous yet assured pencil drawings Mondrian made in Domburg during this unplanned stay at

the start of World War I.[937] Mondrian had been exceptionally productive in those first months of uncertainty about when he might ever return to his chosen home. Besides sketching, time and again, the dunes and the pier jutting into the sea that he then made the basis of larger works, he drew the façade of the Domburg church. Interspersed among the sketches, Mondrian also made personal notes.

In sprawling handwriting, working a soft pencil rapidly across the page, making his letters large, he wrote down ideas as soon as they took possession of him. Here he freely expressed his innermost thoughts. Afterwards, he drew vertical lines through some of what he had written, as if to cross it out—having changed his mind or found a better way to express the same idea—but it all remains legible, and clearly he placed a certain value on what he had replaced and altered, because otherwise he would have excised it completely.

This first small sketchbook is unequaled as a guide to Mondrian's mind. He explains not just the goals of the artistic creation to which he dedicated his life exclusively, but, also, the profound differences he believed existed between men and women. By then, he had developed a strident belief in the opposing nature of the sexes. His ideas were not just essential to his personal conduct, but, according to what he wrote, fundamental to his art.

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With Belgium exploding just south of where Mondrian faced the dunes, and France cut off beyond it, the bachelor artist focused on issues distant in their specifics from current events but central to the human wish for stability and understanding no matter what is happening in the world. He wrote in his sketchbook: 'Two paths to the spiritual: the path of doctrinal instruction or of direct exercise (meditation, etc.); and the slow and sure path of evolution.'[938] The first path—'doctrinal instruction'—lead, he saw (and he had had his fair share of it at the Rijksakademie), 'to degeneration.' What was needed, rather, was a different level of awareness. 'When the artist finds himself on that plane of evolution where conscious and direct spiritual activity becomes possible, we are in the presence of ideal art.'[939]

After his statement about 'direct spiritual activity' Mondrian writes, 'An old soul (or an old stage of spiritual evolution) must dwell in a new body and slowly become conscious.'[940] The large drawings Mondrian was to make of the sea later in 1914, and the pulsating abstractions which were to follow,

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[937] B371 *Sketchbook I, Domburg*, c. October 1914, Guggenheim NY.
[938] Notes in Mondrian Sketchbook I, as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 117.
[939] Notes in Mondrian Sketchbook I, as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 117.
[940] Notes in Mondrian Sketchbook I, as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 117.

are, both individually and as a group, 'a new body.' But they carry forward a truth, a universal energy, which has existed throughout all of time.

The art has the sheer optimism, the generosity, the understanding, of his next statement: 'Each man, each thing, everything in this world has its reason for being. Everything is beautiful, everything is good, everything is necessary; the existence of each thing and each being has its relative value.'[941]

Facing the sea at the moment when a war had just began, writing 'everything is beautiful ... good … [and] necessary,' Mondrian was looking for a permanence and a sense of the lasting that would countermand the morass. Eventually, in his purely abstract paintings with bright colors, he would evoke love and exuberance in a form which would endure in ways that those emotions never actually last in people's minds.

'Likewise, all art is good,' Mondrian continues. 'But the stages of life do not always tally. Hence there is inequality (apparent) and mutual incomprehension.'[942]

He knew all that, we now see, by the time he was scrawling in pencil in that notebook. World War I was gaining momentum. There was no better example of 'mutual incomprehension'. But family issues, the tensions of a marriage between two people, the experiences of people living in the same apartment building or performing in the same workplace, also induce the sense of things not tallying—which for Mondrian meant imbalance, or 'inequality'. It is in ART that we find purity, balance, understanding, perpetual happiness. In Mondrian's compositions, especially, there are no feuds, no right versus wrong, no mistakes, no awkwardness, no struggle, no failure: in short, none of the vicissitudes of real life. This art induces a spiritual state far from those 'stages of life' with their intrinsic difficulties. It offers unblemished ebullience.

IV

Mies Elout-Drabbe was a figurative painter who was one of the leading forces in the Domburg artistic community. Her real first names were Marie Jeannette Sophie Lucie, but her hyphenated last name was quite enough for her, and all she was willing to use before it was the single syllable nickname "Mies", informal and a bit deprecatory. Her chosen nomenclature befitted her aimiable nature and modest confidence. A handsome woman, invariably calm and thoughtful, always dressed in dignified white dresses, her hair well-coiffed in a traditional style that suited someone of old money, she drew in

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[941] Notes in Mondrian Sketchbook I, as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 117.

[942] Notes in Mondrian Sketchbook I, as quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 117.

a manner that matched her appearance and demeanor. Her art was traditional but fresh, her draftsmanship extremely competent.[943]

In September of 1914, Elout-Drabbe made a drawing of Mondrian (Fig. 35) in which he looks like an updated version of one of Ingres' bankers. Elout-Drabbe has rendered his face with his habitual pulling of his mouth ever so slightly to the left. She portrays him as pensive and distant: Mondrian's eyes role upwards, as if he is communicating with a higher force; along with his odd way of holding his mouth, that gaze makes him not quite on this earth.

Fig. 35. Mies Elout-Drabbe, *Portrait of Piet Mondrian*, 1915

Elout-Drabbe described Mondrian as he was in Domburg when she made this drawing and war was engulfing Western Europe: 'He was so engrossed in his work that he was completely unaware of the Belgian refugees who flooded the isle of Walcheren and caused a shortage of relief workers in the towns and villages where they were being accommodated. In the deserted house, Mondrian was standing bolt upright, though with a kink in his back, working at a white sheet of paper at which he was drawing lines. He was standing there giving everything he'd got, even more than the committee members who did their utmost looking after the Belgian refugees. When he went for a walk he seemed to become one with nature,

[943] For biographical details, see: Francisca van Vloten, *Moen. Tussen Toorop en Mondriaan. De kunstenares Mies Elout-Drabbe 1875-1956*, Den Boer/De Ruiter, Vlissingen 2004.

although at first he could overcome his greater love for the city only with difficulty.'[944]

Elout-Drabbe sometimes accompanied him on his evening walks. Her presence did not prevent him from often pulling a small sketchbook out of his pocket and writing or drawing in it. There may well have been more such sketchbooks than the two Holtzman found among Mondrian's possessions after he died. Mondrian drew ceasely in that period when he had no idea of what his next steps would be, when the well-conceived plans he had made at age forty were, after two fruitful years, now thrown off course. 'Day after day he kept working at that suggestive scribble, "each day a step further from reality and a step nearer to its spiritualization."'[945]

Elout-Drabbe did everything possible to help Mondrian enjoy his private journey. In this moment of history when most Europeans were at the edge of panic, she admired his tenacity as well as his otherness. She provided him with the high-quality paper on which he did the larger drawings of the sea, for which the studies in the small sketchbook were preliminary notations. Bijltjes paper, it was named for a small axe, and had the watermark of a hand holding such a strong, sharp-edged tool, slightly larger than a hatchet. The subtle markings evoke the felling of the trees that provides the pulp of the paper. This was the same sort of richly textured sheet on which Elout-Drabbe had drawn Mondrian's portrait; the elegant watermark brings an element of tough reality.

The large drawings of the sea and pier that Mondrian had, by the time he committed them to the Bijltjes paper, carefully worked out, are, in that ultimate stage, exact constructions in which every horizontal or vertical dash appears to have been calibrated to the millimeter. The voids are as finely measured as the pencil strokes. At the start of the sketchbook, we see the first imaginings of those compositions. On cheap paper (now it is weakened and yellowed) reacting spontaneously to the sight in front of his eyes, Mondrian worked in rapid-fire lines. The spontaneous Mondrian—the self he did not intend to be seen by others—was connected one-to-one with nature, its rages as well as its calm. These sketchbook pages are our opening to Mondrian before he applied order, before he cloaked his own furies along with those he clearly saw.

In a flurry of soft pencil strokes, Mondrian establishes, in the foregrounds of these sketches, the form of the pier jutting into the distant ocean, foreshortening it dramatically. It zooms from its wide entrance to its narrow opening to the water; this pier becomes the route of a dramatic journey with its charged angularity, it takes us from solid ground to the infinite sea. The pier is the by-product of human rationalism, the ocean, in

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[944] A.M. Hammacher, 'Piet Mondriaan 1872-1944', in: *Kroniek van Kunst en Kultuur* 8(1947)9, 233. As quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 106.
[945] Hammacher, *Piet Mondriaan*, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 106.

its depths and movement, its ancient history as well as its ongoing processes, is unknowable.

On some of the sketchbook pages, Mondrian surrounds the pier and ocean, and then the sea alone, in an oval that orders it. That elegant, encompassing form reminds us that this is art. Design and regularization are necessary if we are to survive in face of the infinite, just as the pier is requisite for the commerce of the sea, essential for human survival.

We invariably feel, in these small impromptu drawings as in the larger compositions, the presence of a man in direct contact with the big questions of existence. Mondrian wants nothing less than to reveal the meaning of earthly life, by capturing what has been there for many millennia and, one hopes, will always exist. He grapples with universal issues, the questions each of us confronts on some level during our relatively short passages on earth.

#

Mondrian's sketches are one port of entry to this highly sensitive man who put up such a solid front to the world; the thoughts he recorded in urgent, hasty handwriting alongside them is another. In his unexpected exile, he declares, on the first page, 'There is a cause for everything, but we do not always know it. To know constitutes happiness.' (The underling is Mondrian's.)[946] It is not clear whether Mondrian was thinking of the causes of phenomena in general—why, for example, the water lapping at a pier, of which he made a rough sketch to accompany his statement, rises and falls with the tides—or of recent events in his own life. It seems likely, however, that he was referring to self-knowledge. For what follows in the sketchbook pertains to issues of his own identity. Waiting out worldly events, staying with his various friends, making art at the edge of the sea in Domburg as the German army forged into the country just south of him, Piet Mondrian was sorting himself out.

For the previous couple of years, he had been painting walls, creating stopping points. Now he was gazing into infinity, facing the truth of things rather than constructing barriers against them. The essential issue he addressed in a new way was exactly what he felt about men and women. He had no trouble accepting, and articulating, his sharply defined views of gender difference. He was unflinchingly candid in these private jottings:

> Female: static,
> Preserving, obstructing,
> Element.
> Male: kinetic,
> Creative, expressive,
> Progressing element.

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[946] Transcription and English translation in Robert P. Welsh and J.M. Joosten eds., *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912-1914,* Meulenhoff International, Amsterdam 1969, p. 16.

Woman: matter-element
Man: spirit-element
Woman: horizontal line
Man: vertical line
Male artist: spiritual joy
Female artist: material joy.[947]

Fig. 36. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 1*, 1914

On the next page, underneath his drawing of the pier structure, he goes further still with these vertical/horizontal, male/female analogies. In the sketch, he has pushed his pencil firmly in delineating a series of some thirty vertical posts, like tree trunks, that support the pier (Fig. 36). He has indicated the calm sea with diagonal lines, drawn more softly, some of them flowing underneath those posts, others in the distance. Mondrian has scribbled "a" on top of the horizon line, "b" on the railing for pedestrians walking on the pier, "c" on the edge of the pier beneath the railing and above the support posts, and "d" on the lines that suggests the place where the water—or, at low tide, the sand—covers the bottoms of the posts. Beneath all of this, he has written:

Male and female
Vertical and horizontal
Line a in rest
Lines b, c and d not in rest
But pointing the direction.[948]

What this means is not precise, but even though Mondrian's words elude exact understanding, their thrust becomes somewhat clearer in the pages that follow. It comes through that the issue of male and female identities

[947] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 16.
[948] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 17.

and differences was intertwined with his idea of what it means to be a truly creative artist.

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We will delve into Mondrian's extreme sexism in greater detail; it is too important to skim. But first comes Mondrian's blanket encomium to sheer energy. On the page following the drawing of the pier and his initial comments on male/female, he writes

> The intensity, the strength
> And the orientation or character
> Of the inner life-urge (life-force)
> Or joy in life determines
> The character of the artistic expression –
> The essence of the creator.
> The essence of the human being and artist.[949]

Mondrian knew—facing the sea, ruminating about his artistic breakthroughs in France—that, whatever his personal future might be in a tumultuous world, he required strength and a sense of joy in life if he was to create the art that was his goal.

He also felt, now more than ever, that a vital component of his success, of his being able to transmit his own essence into his art, was his solitude. Women were too different from men, he realized, for an intense one-on-one relationship with a female to be possible if he was to achieve his goal of being, as a person, inseparable from his work. (A product of his time, he did not entertain the possibility of such a connection with another man, at least not openly.) On the next seven pages of the pocket-sized sketchbook, he enumerates the essential differences between men and women that prevent a successful union between one of each. He then drew vertical pencil lines through what he had written, as if he had rethought it, but the self-censorship was partial, since he neither erased nor concealed his initial text.

Mondrian writes,

> 'Because of the reasons given below, the love of man for woman is physical, while the love of woman for man is spiritual. For this reason the love of a woman is more enduring, whereas that of a man changes – Spiritual love does not exist for a man, because the spiritual element is weak.'[950]

After nearly a decade of researching Mondrian, these words still bring me to a halt. They did so the first time I read them, but now their strangeness, by my standards anyway, as well as their absolutism, and their significance is all the more striking. I have often asked myself why I should care about Mondrian's sexuality. Why is it significant whether, as Van den Briel's

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[949] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 17.
[950] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 18.

account suggests, if Mondrian was a homosexual who fled his love life with men and then renounced sex completely? Is it consistent with mostly repressed homosexuality that he was an oddball who kissed women ardently, sometimes by surprise and in haste, when they did not expect his lips on theirs, and at other moments, for twenty minutes non-stop? How do those particular, unusual ways of kissing women relate to his attitudes toward the opposite sex? What about his taste for dancing with women avidly, either awkwardly or adeptly depending on the partner who reported it, but eschewed intimacy with his dancing partners and often danced alone? Does it matter whether he slept with prostitutes? Is it significant that after he engaged to marry he became so terrified that he quickly fled to another country? What does this have to do with his art?

None of the facts are certain, but in these lines that Mondrian at age forty-two wrote into his notebook and subsequently crossed out, who he was inside himself comes together.

'The reasons given below' to which Mondrian refers concern the vertical and the horizontal. Now, more than in any of his previous art, he had reduced his vocabulary; there were still occasional diagonals and even curved lines, but straight dashes, perfectly up and down or perfectly sideways, dominated the field. They have become the two main elements of the large pencil drawings of the sea Mondrian was making just at this time. And we have to remember that he was the person who so specifically and absolutely identified the vertical and the horizontal as embodying the male and female.

Moreover, these elements, without a single diagonal or curve remaining, would be the basis of all his subsequent art. The paintings that would be Mondrian's true flowering, his gift to the world, had no linear components whatsoever. Being devoted above all else to the interplay of horizontal and vertical, to right angles as events, Mondrian's art for the most of his life would reflect more than anything else his views of maleness and femaleness and their impact on one another. No wonder those abstract compositions inspire reflections on sexuality, prompting people to ask about Mondrian's personal life, and, at the same time, providing sheer happiness the way that great sexual union does.

'The spiritual'—the very thing Mondrian has declared to be the objective of his art, the goal of the Theosophy that enchanted him, the realm in which he was determined to reside in every element of his existence—was, for him, incompatible with all that is female. This was the first time Mondrian articulated that view, but when he formed it is uncertain. Pieter Mondriaan devoted his life to religion, while Joanna stayed home and made soup and cleaned the house: maybe Mondrian began to develop his arch definitions of maleness and femaleness in early childhood. Perhaps it was Greta Heijbroek who crystallized his ideas. We assume she wanted to commit Mondrian to the good bourgeois life, with her running the household and their having children, with him, even if he might persist as the more spiritual

one, feeling his male ideal compromised by her mere presence. However Mondrian's stance developed, the certainty is that he separated the sexes to an extreme extent.

In the sketchbook, he writes:

> 'Because the female element is matter, as a basic type, woman is hostile to the spirit. Simultaneously she is a friend. Matter and spirit oppose and desire each other. Being a unity, they attract each other. Positively and negatively. A woman desires spirit and to be spirit, but in primal essence she remains matter. Man desires matter and nonetheless remains spirit. He continually yearns for matter and his spirit grows thereby. Woman continually yearns for spirit, and her spirit thereby also grows. Woman is the real, man the unreal. Woman is against art, against abstraction—in her innermost being. However she desires art and abstraction, but is not abstraction. Man does not desire it, but is it in his innermost being.'[951]

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Is this simply an upmarket, more intellectual version of "Men are from Mars, women are from Venus"? Or was Mondrian simply a nut case? Did he produce such sane art because he was off the wall in his life?

I once spoke with Anni Albers about Helene Nonné-Schmidt, a fellow weaving student at the Bauhaus, who like Anni, married one of the masters there in 1925. (Nonné-Schmidt's husband was the sculptor and teacher Joost Schmidt.) Nonné-Schmidt claimed that women became weavers rather than painters because they could only see and comprehend in two dimensions. This nasty woman—she is brutal and despicably assertive in her writing—believed that females lacked the grasp of depth, physical and spiritual, that men have, and that that limitation rendered them incapable of becoming good in any art form that penetrates space.

Anni told me that, when she was in the sixties, and she and Josef were back in Germany, she had been slated to be seated next to Nonné-Schmidt at an official dinner. Suddenly, just before people were to go to the table, one of the organizers of the event became horrified, imagining what it would be for the foremost weaver of the Bauhaus to be placed next to the person who espoused these views on the limitations of the female mind and on the commitant appropriateness of textile working "for ladies." I asked Anni how she handled it. She smiled and said she assured the host, 'We have fled the Nazis. There are things worse than dinner next to Nonné-Schmidt.' It was as if, without saying she was doing as such, she could, by example, disprove a wretched woman's sexism by being so non-hysterical and open-minded. I also think that Anni did not really care about Nonné-Schmidt's

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[951] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 18-19.

generalization, akin to Mondrian's, or might have thought that the antagonistic views were partially right. As modern feminism took hold toward the end of Anni's life, she regularly discredited it.

Mondrian is not the first person to have accused women of being deficient in spiritual qualities or lacking the depth of men. Some of you may take it in stride, and let it go. But while I know we do not have to like everything about Piet Mondrian just because he was such a wonderful painter, in his case, to an exceptional degree, the person and the art are so much part of the same mind-set that what to me is this emotional blindness, and a horrible disparagement of over half of the people in the world, has to be considered for what it really was—however ugly.

But I cannot anymore than I am ever willing to excuse racial prejudice with the insufficient "consider the time period," separate the calm assuredness, and the didacticism, of Mondrian's silly sexism from the balance and supreme intelligence of his art. The artist who had the warmth and brilliance to paint *Red Cloud* and *Woods at Oele* and his vibrant and moving late abstract compositions was a prig, and there is some vital connection between the two, as challenging as it is to reconcile such opposite emotional leanings.

I believe that, in his painting, Mondrian was really happy to get away from his deprecatory self. He needed to escape his own orneriness and to paint a warmth and connectedness and happy relationship of all the elements that he lacked inside himself.

#

When Mondrian wrote that woman '*desires* art and abstraction, but is not abstraction. Man does not desire it, but *is* it in his innermost being,' it was not necessarily intended for anyone else to see. He believed what he was saying, but he might have realized that it would offend a lot of people were it known.

I suspect, though, that some of this same sexism figured in the essay that had been turned down by the Theosophical Society. He boasted to his friends that the text had been rejected because it was too advanced, so ahead of the time that others were not yet ready for it. It is possible, however, that the real problem was that the editors considered Mondrian's views ridiculous—or, at the least, unpublishable because of their tastelessness and tactlessness. The Theosophical Society had been founded by a woman, and its greatest adherents were women. The idea that women are incapable of the reach into the realm of abstract thought is at odds with both the history and tenets of Theosophy. Mondrian's blanket statements about women lacking spiritual depth do not spare Madame Blavatsky; he makes no exceptions.

V

Mondrian drew a bold horizontal line underneath his audacious statement that only men have abstraction within their inner selves. Why did he underline his words with what he identifies as the emblematic representation of the female? He proceeds to differentiate the sexes further: 'Woman has within herself the urge toward spiritual art but seeks it with her intelligence alone because her primal essence is anti-spiritual. Only when she has conquered this primal essence, can the spiritual be truth in her.'

Then he declares male power with the pure braggadocio of his verticals:

> 'Because man in his primal essence is spirit, this manifests itself as force in the raw. Because man in his primal essence is spirit, he has an urge toward matter. The spiritual man makes use of the female physical element as matter which is to be worked upon; the development of his spiritual element is so strong that he perceives his spirit within this matter. Sometimes this coincides with the developed spiritual element in a woman, and hence actual love comes into being—but only if this element is sufficiently strong in a woman.'[952]

Reading this, as we picture the large tree trunks, the church steeples, and the vertical edges of planes in Mondrian's Cubist compositions, they loom as great phallic forces. Resting on and rising from the mellow baselines beneath them, they resemble fertility objects in a primitive culture. Those verticals, simplified and taut, would outweigh the horizontals of the compositions he would soon create; until *Victory Boogie Woogie*, the thrust of Mondrian's art would be heavenward, toward the spiritual realm—and preeminently male.

#

Mondrian knew a lot of women in Domburg; he had a number of female friends, if not as many as the male ones. Most of them were painters, or at least ladies who took art lessons. In addition, his male friends' girlfriends and wives— Maaike Middelkoop, who would marry Van Domselaer, and Albertine Schelfhout—were part of his circle. He presumably had them and their husbands in mind when he continued:

> 'Women and men do not understand each other's primal essence because one is matter and the other spirit. Spirit is opposed to matter, positive-negative, they attract each other nevertheless.'[953]

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[952] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 19-20.
[953] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 21.

His underlining suggests the urgency of his thoughts, and makes clear his thinking. There was no denying the force of sexual attraction. But Mondrian was struggling with something. To escape or at least circumvent the confusion of human feelings, he tried to categorize and systematize them. He made a list of emotions and gave assigned numbers to them, presumably to rank them with the most worthy at the summit.

Sorrow – 1
Joy – 2
Tranquility – 3

Underneath it, he writes, 'Sensitivity – intelligence and sensitivity. Intelligent people comprehend this art, earlier an art of feeling – dramatic.'[954]

Here it is impossible to understand fully what is going on in Mondrian's mind. What we do know, though, is that, having opted for solitude in Paris, and now being cut off from the promising new way of life he had chosen for himself, he tried, without complaint, to patch together an existence where he could continue against the odds to make art. Clearly he needed to order and control his emotions with the same rigor and assuredness of placement as the lines and forms that comprised the paintings on which he now worked in the borrowed rooms, one after another, to which he moved without ever knowing when he would get back to the one space, simple and minimal though it was, that was his own.

VI

Unexpected upheaval in life either diminishes us or strengthens us. In his surprising exile from the life he had charted in Paris, with no way of knowing what lay ahead, Mondrian, used to coping with what was uncontrollable inside himself, now had to deal with the loss of the scaffolding he had constructed to buffer and protect himself. When younger, he had suffered through states of anguish that lasted for months. But once he broke his engagement and moved to Paris, he had come to accept himself and made a life that provided emotional balance. With a new grasp of his own truths, a living environment that made him content in his solitude, and an artistic style that avoided what was unmanageable and replaced it with emotional ballast and joy, he had, in his fifth decade of life, started to feel steady inside. Now that the structure was lost to him, his solution was to depend all the more on his art. This is what he was referring to in the notebook, albeit in incoherent language intended only for himself, when he jotted down his thoughts on the progress from the "dramatic" phase—in his art and self—to "intelligence." As long as he retained his clear and thoughtful approach to painting, he could continue to keep the furies at bay. Better yet, even as a vagabond, he could flourish.

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[954] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 20.

#

To an extraordinary extent, in a way extremely rare among other human beings, not only had Mondrian, after nearly forty years of uncertainty, squarely face a lot about who he was, and decide his life's course accordingly; he then, quite simply, followed his own plan.

He writes in the sketchbook:

> 'Since the male principle is the vertical line, a man shall recognize this element in the ascending trees of a forest; he sees his compliment in the horizontal line of the sea. The woman, with the horizontal line as characteristic element, recognizes herself in the recumbent lines of the sea and sees herself complemented in the vertical lines of the forest / which represent the male element / [The slashes are Mondrian's.] Thus the impression differs. In art it is unified.'[955]

Mondrian continues from declaring that 'in art it is unified'—the 'it' being the relationship between male and female—to say that this is 'Because the artist is sexless. Since the artist accordingly represents the female and male principle, and not nature directly, a work of art transcends nature.'[956]

It would be different if Mondrian declared abstract painting, or his rendering of vertical and horizontal as neuter, or as sexually resolved. But he defines *himself* as 'sexless.' He is without question the person in question, who has reduced art to the rendering of horizontal and vertical and gone beyond nature to something more desirable.

Whatever Mondrian's issues were—homosexual, heterosexual, obsessed with his father, overly attached to his mother—the only resolution for him was by getting away from the trees to transcendent abstraction. And that he chooses to refer to himself in the third person, which could be considered either as coy or as egocentric, makes all the clearer his need, even as he discusses himself, to get away from something in himself.

#

He knew what he wanted. He writes: 'Man degenerates as a physical and evolves as a spiritual being. Regression is female. Progress is male.'[957]

Of course most of us cringe at this. But we cannot turn away from it if we really want to understand the essence of Piet Mondrian's approach to human beings.

Beneath that last statement, Mondrian has drawn a curved arrow that loops upwards and then veers to the left to begin a nearly perfect circle which ends with the point of the arrow. The form is practically fetal, divided vertically into two halves. He has scribbled 'right' across it (Fig. 37).

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[955] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 22.
[956] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 22.
[957] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 22.

Below that, he has formed a circle out of an arrow with the point going in the reverse direction—clockwise—and now with a straight dividing line in the middle. He has scribbled 'left' over it. What he means precisely can only be guessed—it is unlikely that he was aware of theories about the left and right sides of the brain—except that he is emphatic about the diametrical opposition of male and female.

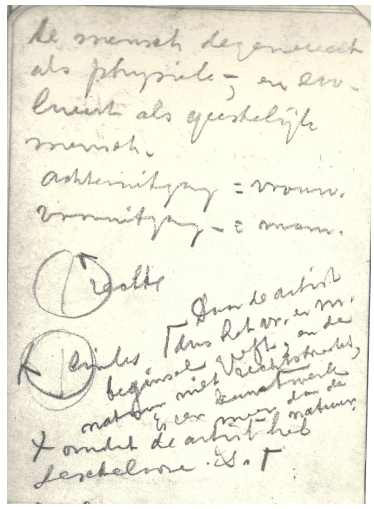

Fig. 37. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg*, 1914

#

Mondrian next writes, in bolder pencil strokes than the rest of his words,

<u>Custom</u> is the obstacle to understanding

and underscores the statement twice.

Why did he push his pencil down with so much force at this moment? Surely he realized it was not the first time that he had moved beyond traditional thinking. He had determined years earlier that to paint in the same style as Uncle Frits was a form of death, just as it would be to adhere to the Calvinism that had been the bread and butter of his childhood. But now he was moving beyond more recently established customs. Cubism was still revolutionary to some people, but to the inner circle it was already ingrained, and Mondrian was assiduously avoiding anything that had become routine to other people. This was even more true of his way of life, his decisions concerning domesticity and the ruling expectations of human relationships, as about artistic style.

He continues:

> 'There is a necessity for strengthening and simplifying the form and the color of visible objects.

Red face – green
Red – external
Green – internal'[958]

What does this mean? We know that Mondrian will eviscerate green from his future art; it never exists in his abstract constructions. Some people assume that this was a conscious move from the color of leaves and grass, but I assume it was a deliberate avoidance of any form of mixture. His colors would, within the next few years, evolve to being only the primary ones—and remain as such until he loosened up in New York in the last years of his life. My hunch is that he associated green with the internal because green is inevitably a combination of blue and yellow, a merging of two individual elements. To Mondrian, that combustion—the human realtionships, the interactions of one person with another, the disturbance of a certain purity—all the factors that disturb the mind and cause us to wake fitfully from sleep, where other people and their impact have become factored in, was the reason that green, like all other mixed colors, had to be eliminated. The 'internal' was precisely what he wanted to avoid.

Much of this text, while lean and spare, is opaque and mysterious. What remains clear, though, is that Mondrian sought evolution to a spiritual state—the subject of the triptych he had painted just before leaving the Netherlands for Paris three years earlier—and that a requisite for getting there was to take his personal self out of his art.

#

Mondrian continues: 'In order to express in form the power which emanates from nature, lines generally must be made much blacker in the plastic arts than one ordinarily sees them in nature.'[959]

On the next page, he makes a fantastic sketch (Fig. 38). Exceptionally, he writes nothing above or under it, leaving the image to make a statement that is all the stronger for its lack of words. The subject is a pier, dramatically foreshortened, lunging into the ocean, but, rather than descending into it, thrusting upwards. The balustrade that prevents users from falling off this pier is composed of powerful verticals. The sea underneath it is a thick progression of horizontals.

The pier is penetrating the ocean sexually. It does so powerfully, assertively, rapturously. The manmade, and manly, has conquered the natural, and feminine. Rational construction, and the analytic capacity Mondrian ascribes to maleness, renders the sea—the cradle of the earth—subservient.

Straight black lines will be Mondrian's tool from here on.

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[958] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 21.
[959] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 23.

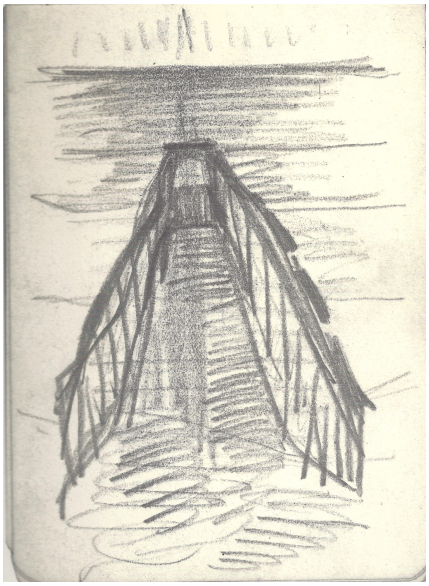

Fig. 38. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 2*, 1914

VII

It is in spontaneous sketches rather than in an artist's finished constructions that we get close to his instinctive responses to what he sees. The finished art will show the results of his subsequent formulations, the developing and processing of systems he will apply subsequent to his gut instincts. The preliminary drawings allow us to see the moment of conception.

Mondrian would, over the course of his life, write many essays. His published writings are voluminous. It is unlikely that more than a handful of people have read, or will read, every word of them, because the texts are long, difficult to fathom, and repetitive. I will spare you the effort—although, if you want to undertake it, there is a fine compendium of all of this writing.[960] The essays in it, which Mondrian wrote in the hopes of spreading his doctrine, mostly elaborate what he laid out in summary form in the notes he spontaneously scribbled when facing the sea in Domburg during that September visit in 1914. He wrote the longer texts because he was obsessed—because he could not stop stating and restating what he believed in—but the sentiments would not change, and his beliefs would be constant. He was a remarkably consistent human being. At age forty-two, he established guidelines for his life; he wrote them down quickly, and from then on he adhered to them. His visual language would grow simpler, his

[960] Harry Holtzman; Martin S. James, *The New Art – The New Life. The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, Thames and Hudson, London 1987.

verbal expression more complex, but he would stick to his beliefs unflinchingly. The brief texts in the notebooks, like the sketches in them, bring us as face to face with Piet Mondrian as he would ever be.

#

There would be one occasion when, in spite of his determined separations of the male and female, he would let emotion get the better of him. At that extraordinary moment in the late 1920s, he was ready to throw caution to the winds. It is as if he suddenly stopped making Mondrians and painted a Jackson Pollock instead.

It is not so surprising that he would, just once, turn himself upside down. He was not an automaton. For Mondrian was too smart, too sure of himself, to be rigid. He allowed, always, for his own evolution. He recognized with an astounding perceptiveness that internal conflict was intrinsic to life, and human change imperative if one is to remain healthy. Having been brought up in a milieu that advocated irrevocable rules, where there was one hidebound way to do things, and only one, he took the opposite approach. For the man who sometimes danced alone, stayed so distant from others, and always looking so ramrod rigid in his photos, was also vulnerable. Irrational longings could, when strong enough, topple the applecart. He had room for love and desire to prevail.

That capacity, Mondrian's quintessential humanity, his vulnerability on top of his impeccable standards, is what makes his art leap. The artist and writer of these notebooks he filled when the outside structure of his life was torn asunder would always be at the core of the human being who presented his vision and himself with the more precise organization apparent in most of his life's work.

#

Mondrian made further sketches in his notebook. He showed the pier with its strong vertical railing jutting as if upwards into the horizontal sea, contradicting reality. He would evoke foliage with a flurry of horizontal and vertical dashes, and illustrate the façade of the church at Domburg with its crisp rhythm of vertical steeples and horizontal architraves. The sole vertical element in the otherwise entirely horizontal vista of one of his ocean views of the sea and horizon is the mast pole of a distant sailboat—the mark of man's ingenuity in navigating through nature—but at least there is *one* vertical. Generally in the sketchbooks he worked out the vertical/horizontal—male/female duality with a greater balance of those two elements. Concomitant to doing those sketches, he continued to explore that juxtaposition in the words with which he expressed his innermost thoughts.

But he also made a few rare drawings that have only horizontal elements. There he was isolating the female, presenting her alone. The dunes and sea resemble a naked voluptuous woman; we can read the horizon of the seascape as her long hair and back and the start of her hips while she lies face down (Fig. 39). In another, we read what is purportedly the ocean as a

pert nipple and breast and narrow waist and the start of the pubis of a woman lying on her back (Fig. 40).

Fig. 39. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 21*, 1914

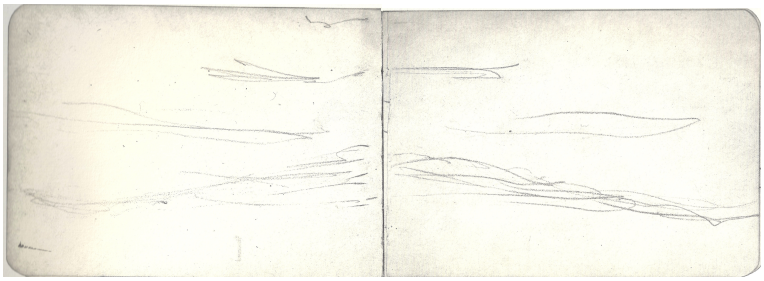

Fig. 40. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 25*, 1914

In his words as well, rather than denying the force of sensuousness, Mondrian embraces it. And then, like some of the most sophisticated psychiatrists of our own epoch, he acknowledges conflict as inevitable. He appears to say that it is only how one deals with conflict that can make or keep one sane, but that avoiding the inherent complexity of one's feelings is impossible. He writes:

> 'The conflict between Matter and Force exists in everything; between the male and female principle. This also in social life. The balance between the two means happiness. This is difficult to achieve, partly because the one is abstract and the other real. Through conflict comes life; change is necessary.'[961]

[961] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 24.

VIII

There is a photograph of Mondrian taken in the late 1920s and since then reproduced in various books on modern architecture, that shows him on the flat roof of Le Corbusier's recently completed large white modernist villa for Michael Stein in the Paris suburb of Garches. Four other people stand on top of a small structure on the roof; Mondrian has positioned himself below them, leaning against a curved staircase. The others are very much a group, smiling and joking and having a good time, their camaraderie palpable. Mondrian, isolated, stands rigid. Impeccably dressed—in a double-breasted suit—he stares at the camera. In clothing and posture, he resembles Le Corbusier, for whom he could easily be mistaken in the photo. Besides being isolated, he appears costumed and masked. In another photo taken during the visit, at the entrance of the villa, Mondrian wears a well-fit, wide-brimmed hat. In that way, too, he resembles Le Corbusier: two totally original, daring, radical artists, able to confront tradition and let themselves loose in their art, determined to be cloacked in correctness and style in their personas.

We discover in the 1914 sketchbook that for Mondrian it had become a conscious decision not just to present himself with a protective veener, but to maintain his apartness. He deliberately managed his everyday life, and his self, so that he could inure himself against personal issues, self-consciousness, and the range of feelings that inevitably occur when people interact with one another. But he did not insulate or anesthetize himself. Rather, he harnessed his intensity of feeling to channel it in his creativity.

The reticence of the man—not just on the surface, but inside himself—allowed the passion to soar in his art. Mondrian redirected and externalized what most people internalyze. He used the power of conflict and the juxtaposition of opposites to achieve balance IN HIS ART. Mondrian's achievement organized and regulated as it is, bursts with emotion, and is warm and generous. With confidence and self-knowledge, it connects to all of humanity by avoiding the pitfalls of the self.

#

As we read what Mondrian wrote in 1914, we should picture the vibrating reds and yellows and blues he would present in a rhythmic black gridwork in the years ahead. The art, like his thinking, embraces human complexity without an iota of embarrassment:

> 'Men's one-sided way of thinking is grossly erroneous; a storm is seen only as a storm (fury) and not as the general Good. … The storm (the passions) is not a fearsome beast which has been let loose and must be bridled. It is the expression of a power which operates at due time.'[962]

[962] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 27.

When there is a word in parenthesis, it is because Mondrian, in Dutch, has indicated his second formulation in that way. He tried different words just as in the same way that he would revise the black lines of his composition. Like a marksman aiming for the center of his target, he tried to be as articulate as possible. That precision demonstrated his point—that ardor needs to be handled correctly, rather than stifled. Not for a minute does Mondrian deny his passions; what he does, rather, is calibrate how to express them effectively.

#

As he sat on the dunes and scribbled in his notebook during that tumultuous autumn of 1914, Mondrian realized with unprecedented zeal another idea he had long been nurturing. It was his increased conviction that intense feelings, not only as he would let them be seen but as he intended to experience them, need to be universal, not individual. He became adamant about the necessity of not expressing his private passions in his work. He wrote that 'a personal and noble emotion, strongly expressed in one direction'[963]—by this we assume he means either the vertical/male, or the horizontal/female—weakens the ability of a human being to function in society, in concord with others, or of paintings to succeed. 'Similarly in art; a certain very beautiful, one-sided emotion is not universal (many-sided) enough to crystallize into universal, eternal beauty.'[964] For those same reasons, he now ruled out portraiture as a worthy art form; it was too individual, and photographic.

#

In one sketch of the dunes and the sea and what appears to be a boat on the sand (Fig. 41), black clouds bear down on the horizon as if heavy rains are about to let loose, and the agitated pencil work that composes the land suggests furious wind. The tempestuous scene, however, is encased in one of Mondrian's graceful ovals: the device of French picture-making recently revived by Braque and Picasso. On the page facing this fever-pitch drawing, Mondrian writes, 'An old soul must learn and slowly become conscious in a new body.'[965]

The words elucidate the meaning of the scene and of his style for drawing it. The sea and sky invoke 'an old soul'—the natural setting that has been there since well before the ancient mariner sailed —while the consciousness is Mondrian's, the 'new body' being the free and experimental way in which he has rendered a subject that has been there forever.

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[963] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 28.
[964] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 27.
[965] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 30.

Fig. 41. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 11*, 1914

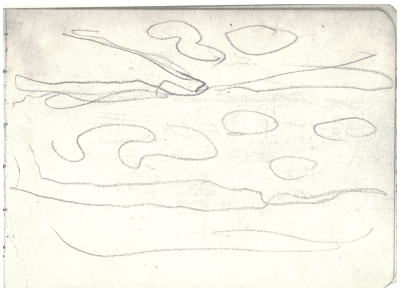

Fig. 42. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 12*, 1914

Mondrian makes such statements with complete assuredness, yet without a hint of arrogance. Facing a totally different vision of dunes and sky, with free-form shapes and happy ovals racing around in the foreground—with sheer joy palpable in his flying pencil (Fig. 42) —he writes 'Concerning good and evil—beauty and ugliness (this is mere appearance) […] Man is as he is […] Should he be good, that is beautiful; if he is bad, then he is somewhat lazy and retarded. Evolution goes slowly.'[966]

How astonishingly non-judgmental, how devoid of moral superiority, this is—especially from a person who was brought up in an abundance of absolute judgment and regulation and "Holier than thou" ness. Moreover, it is patient. Mondrian knows not to push his point.

#

For what comes through in the sketchbook as in the increasingly sophisticated art he would make for the rest of his life is Mondrian's quintessential humility. He would never couch his language with "in my opinion" or "to be perfectly honest," because he knew what he felt without ambivalence, while he was also the opposite of grandiose.

'Man can accomplish something, but very little. Because man understands nothing, he does everything badly. When he does nothing, he does best. Man is not a God.'[967]

The Academy had taught him little. But by slowly going into himself, isolating himself first in Brabant, then in Oele, meditating, living alone, and now facing the ocean, he had done the sort of 'nothing' that facilitated the slow evolution he knew he required.

#

Mondrian's conscious rejection of a love life is explicit in the next two- page spread of the sketchbook. He made a simple drawing of three trees—with tall straight trunks and modest foliage. These verticals overpower the soft horizontals which, behind them, suggest a calm lake. Opposite this image,

[966] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 31.
[967] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 32.

Mondrian writes: 'The man-artist is female and male at the same time; therefore he does not need a woman. The female artist is never completely an artist; thus one cannot say that she does not need a man.'[968]

Further commentary on that statement would only be gratuitous and dilute its sting.

IX

Even while he was back on his home turf for longer than he had expected, Mondrian was made to confront again the traditions with which he had grown up. Once he had rejected them by leaving the Netherlands two and a half years earlier, he had thought he had safely put behind him, for all times, what for his family and Dutch friends, was still the ideal—a domestic life built around marriage, children, a nice house, and material comfort. He did not know many people in Paris, but the ones he knew lived otherwise. Now, with his old friends and cousins around, the pressure was on again. For a second time, he had to buck a way of life that had become anathema to him. He did not even care if he had an economic cushion, so long as he was scraping by sufficiently to be able to devote himself to painting and writing.

Mondrian was determined to understand, and explain, at least to himself, the reasons he had arrived at his current position. Juxtaposed to vivid sketches of the façade of the church at Domburg, the sea and dunes, and trees, he continued to write down his ideas of how to live. He was resolute about his decisions, and the lively and articulate drawings echo the contentment they afforded him. While capturing their subjects effectively, Mondrian's pencil strokes are intensely animated, conveying the freedom he had found for himself and the totality of his engagement with daily existence on his own terms.

Both the church and the natural scenes were perfect subjects. The house for worshipping God, and the miracles of earthly life, suited Mondrian's frame of mind. What he chose to draw had the spiritual quality that was, he was now completely certain, what matters most in life.

In neat lines across the page, his penmanship as confident and authoritative as his drawings, he wrote: 'Path of learning usually leads to the corruption of art […] Where conscious, spiritual, direct activity is possible, then one has attained the ideal art.'[969]

'The spiritual is expressed firstly in physical forms, but also in other intermediate forms (which we do not see). If one conceives these intermediate forms as increasingly simple and pure […] then one passes

[968] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 34.
[969] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 35.

through a world of forms ascending from reality to abstraction. In this manner one approaches Spirit, or purity itself.'[970]

Nobody, and no object, is beyond beauty. 'Every human being, every object, everything in this world has a reason to exist. Everything is beautiful, everything is good. Everything is necessary—all things and all men. […] Likewise all art is good. Everything finds itself in a certain stage of life at a certain time.'[971]

Then Mondrian charts his own development, although not declaring that this is what he is doing:

> 'After having loved surface (appearances) for a long time, one searches for something greater. […] Beholding the surface, the inner image is formed in our souls. This image is what we must render through form. For in nature the surface of things is beautiful, but its imitation is lifeless. The objects give us everything, but their depiction gives us nothing. Art was always too concerned with imitation.'[972]

Mondrian was on the fence—between being non-judgmental and judgmental, between accepting everything and specifying his standards exactly. Unlike most people, however, he was unfazed by his ambivalence. The contradictions did not bother him; he was too transported by his profound sense of faith. Beauty is everywhere.

#

It was the 'everywhere' and 'everyone' that interested Mondrian. In Domburg and Amsterdam he knew and saw people to the extent that suited him, but he remained emotionally isolated. He had friends, and most people liked him, accepting his eccentricities, while no one individual gained intimacy with him. Still, Mondrian thought a great deal about people in the broader sense, and how they affected one another. Mondrian ranked *relationships* as what counted most of all. On two pages that read vertically, so that one has to turn the horizontal sketchbook ninety degrees to the right, he wrote—again in his firmest, most emphatic pencil strokes— 'Do not regard a human being merely as a <u>person</u> by himself; but also as he <u>is</u> vis-à-vis another person (that is <u>how beneficial</u> he is to another [there is no closing parenthesis.]'[973] For Mondrian himself, the 'another person'```` was generic. One's ultimate impact on humanity completely superceded his connection with particular individuals.

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[970] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 36.
[971] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 40.
[972] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 39-40.
[973] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 41.

Fig. 43. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 22,* 1914

There is a very lightly drawn sketch of a tree beneath Mondrian's instructions to regard individuals not on their own but in regard to their effect on others (Fig. 43). The tree, I am convinced, is a stand-in for a self-portrait. The vertical trunk is the ultimate symbol of maleness, and the branches and foliage extend into the universe. Reaching this way and that, like tentacles exploring the surrounding world, they are perfectly emblematic of Mondrian at this moment in his life. Mondrian's advice was intended above all for himself. This sketchbook, after all, was not made for others to say—and his instruction was to integrate within the world at large, to be one's self entirely but while also penetrating all of civilization.

#

Whereas the words with which Mondrian advocates personal generosity are stated forcefully, through their authoritative penmanship and the pressure of the pencil on the paper, the tree is drawn so lightly as to be immaterial, devolving into the atmosphere. While the first pages of the notebook, with the drawings of the pier and the sea, date from 1914, following the move to Domburg, here the date is more likely 1912 or 1913—when Mondrian was drawing a lot of trees in Paris. At the time, he had just recently broken off the engagement with Greta Heijbroek. He had come to realize, as he told Aletta de Iongh, that he could not devote his life to another person, or a family, and give society at large what he would have to offer. Mondrian's nature would never have allowed him to be a selfish husband and father, in the manner of famously self-centered artists like Picasso; if he could not give his all, he had no wish to have a wife and children.

But it was his inherent notion of service to humankind that motivated him above all else. The idea of having an impact, of giving something to the world—which had dominated his father's life—had been central to Mondrian's upbringing. The same motivation that, in 1903, had led him to become a political activist, ready to resort to almost any means to help the urban poor, had, more recently, draw him to Theosophy and its idea that reaching a spiritual state should be a primary goal of existence. Living solo was requisite to his making a spiritual gift to the world. Moreover, he was leery of women in general, and had set himself free in accord with his own pathological discomfort with females on an intellectual or spiritual plane. Over a second drawing, of lots of trees—the trunks parallel verticals, the branches technically diagonal but also essentially vertical, with the ground and foliage in a spare amount of lighter horizontals—Mondrian continues:

> 'A man always will be disappointed if he loves a woman in her spiritual substance, because this is of lesser quality in a woman than in himself.
>
> Should this spiritual quality in a woman be very high, then (in most cases) she is physically less radiant and falls short of the demands made by a man as a lover of matter.'[974]

He goes from there to discuss 'an artist.' The one he has in mind is most certainly himself:

> 'An artist can not truly love a woman, because he loves abstraction alone and woman is the real. A man can love a woman only physically, and not spiritually, because a man (spirit) loves matter. A woman, in contrast, can love a man spiritually, because it is a man (spirit) whom she loves.'[975]

It was a further variation of his very particular sexism. This belief was in all likelihood an afterthought, the rational he had developed to explain why he had stopped pursuing the idea of marriage and closeness to a woman or else it was a way of explaining a very different cause for his bachelorhood, one he was determined to keep secret, possibly even from himself: a preference for men exclusively.

#

On the last eight pages of the notebook, Mondrian wrote further reflections, made two drawings of trees (one quite representational, the other very cubistic), did an ethereal rendering of the church at Domburg, and left some pages blank. He ends with a drawing of the sea. The sun setting low on the

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[974] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 42.
[975] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 43.

horizon is an expression of sheer ecstasy. It is, as more and more of Mondrian's work would become, an ode to joy (Fig. 44).

Fig. 44. Mondrian, *Sketchbook I, Domburg, sketch 29*, 1914

Sitting on the dunes, cut off from his home base, uncertain about where he would put his few possessions and sleep the next week, by choice essentially alone in the world, Mondrian had worked out his own internal issues with new clarity and discovered in a new way his alliance with what was universal. His epiphany soars through this small sketch that concludes the sketchbook, and in the accompagning text. Mondrian had come to grips with his own floundering, the internal conflicts that require understanding and management if they are not to destabilize us, and figured out how to make their fusion a source of contentment rather than disrupture.

He writes:

> 'The positive and negative states of being bring about action. They bring about the loss of balance and of happiness. [. . .] Being positive or negative is the cause of the rupture of unity, cause of all unhappiness. The oneness of positive and negative is happiness.'[976]

In his mid-forties, having tried this and that path, he now knew what few people ever realize—and what most of those few, even after recognizing it, then forget—which is that as long as one separates what one perceives as the positive and negative of the soul and regards them as irreconcilable elements, a feeling of disunity and unhappiness ensues. Yet, if one can achieve a state of mind in which the opposing aspects of the psyche co-exist harmoniously, happiness is possible.

[976] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 47-48.

Whatever the conflicting elements are—the realities of one's sexual desires in contrast to the behavior one considers acceptable; ambivalent feelings about one's mother and father; fantasies of evil versus a notion of the good—is beside the point. What counts is the word Mondrian underlines: their 'oneness'. Mondrian not only achieved it within himself, but made the unity of seemingly opposite forces the essence of his art. No wonder his constructions of black lines on white, with blues and yellow and reds sparkling within their stricktly horizontal and vertical nexus would bring such consummate well-being to so many people!

X

Derivatives of the word happiness—"geluk" in Dutch—permeate Mondrian's jottings. He had a simple goal: to achieve happiness, as opposed to unhappiness, as the essence of his art. That desired joy depended on the balance of opposites. The relationship of vertical and horizontal, of white and black, had to be correct. Mondrian's life echoed his art accordingly.

Mondrian continues:

> 'Therefore, the more the positive and the negative are united in one nature, the greater the happiness. This unity is pronounced in the artist, in whom both male and female elements are found. Thereby, however, he is no longer purely male; thus further away from the positive physical pole.'[977]

Mondrian was consciously in quest of that balance:

> 'To be closer to the positive physical pole, to be purely positive or negative is to be unhappy. Because positive cannot exist without negative—and the one seeks the other. And since there is a chance the search will fail, there is a chance of being unhappy.'[978]

His recognition that too much maleness without femaleness, or the reverse, in any one person, is an imbalance that causes anguish, was ahead of its time. It was certainly not in school that Mondrian learned that a coherent, cohesive whole provides the best chance of mental health. He had discovered this on his own. And his having arrived at such knowledge independently infused its representation with the energy of victory.

Mondrian's grids—his bold black horizontals and verticals so well adjusted to one another, in correct proportion, meeting at the right places—and his shimmering whiteness and his euphoric color: these components

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[977] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 47.
[978] Welsh, *Mondrian sketchbooks*, p. 47.

represent a splendid state of being. That happy completeness could be intuitively felt by a child—just as, in the proliferation of Mondrian's art on everything from billboards to shoes, it provides joy to people of every age all over the world.

#

Mondrian was like his father in the totality of his conviction, but confined his expression of his beliefs to his private sketchbook, rather than shout them from the pulpit the way Pieter Mondriaan had. The son, quietly confident, needed no bombast. His way of bringing others into his discoveries would be through his very delicate and beautiful art. But the access to what he wrote only for himself helps us understand his art all the better, for what he achieved with whiteness and a black grid and proportionate rectangles of color was the realization of ideas he developed at a time when everything in his life except for his capacity to make art was uncertain: a faith in the power of visual absolutes, and the resolution to devote his life to realizing them in new ways for the benefit of others. Determined and unwavering, he stuck to those beliefs forever after.

XI

The Germans got fifteen miles from the northern limits of Paris in the first month of the war, forcing the French government to evacuate to Bordeaux. But the Kaiser's troops got no further. Between September 5 and 12, the French troops arrived at the front lines, on the River Marne. Thousands of taxis had been commandeered for the transport of back-up troops, most of them wounded or exhausted and too weak to fight, but bolstering the spirits of the men in front. They pushed the Germans back to Oise, about seventy-five miles from Paris.

Initially, life in Paris remained pretty much as it had been before, in spite of the country being at war. But, since all routes from the north still required going through occupied Belgium or Germany itself, and he had been dissuaded against the sea journey, Mondrian continued to have no means of getting back home. He spent the rest of 1914, up until the holidays, in Domburg, and then went to Arnhem to spend Christmas and New Year's with his father. At the start of 1915, still unable to imagine when the situation would change, he accepted the reality that he needed a place to live for the long term.

Again for Mondrian, other people came to his rescue. This was the case to an extraordinary degree for all of his adult life. While he had no really close friends—a rule to which Van den Briel might have been considered the exception, except that they were a generation apart in age and had no parity, Van den Briel by choice always having been subservient—he always knew people who respected him enough as an artist to come to his help. He also had a survival instinct that got him to let them know he needed them.

This time, his savior was Catharina Hannaert, the woman who had introduce him to Van Domselaer. She invited Mondrian to take a room in De Linden, her capacious and slightly old-fashioned country house in Laren. He could, she told him, remain there until the summer season, when she ran it as a pension for holiday-makers. He did not have to pay her, which was a relief since he still had to come up with rent money every month for his Paris studio. At the start of January, he moved into these free new digs, devoid of possessions except the clothes he had traveled with six months earlier, a couple of things friends had given him to help him brave the winter months, and his art supplies and latest canvases.

Twenty-eight kilometers to the southeast of Amsterdam, with just over three thousand inhabitants, Laren was different from other Dutch towns. In the 1880s, the prominent Hague School painter Jozef Israëls had discovered the village and transformed it into a summer community for his friends. They were mostly anarchists, Theosophists, and artists—with some of them belonging to all those groups. Laren was a refuge for these individuals who did not fit in with the bourgeoisie.

Laren enchaned Israëls from the moment he saw it. The town was essentially as it had been for centuries. Unlike other villages close to Amsterdam, it was untouched by the incursion of industrialization. Surrounded by a rolling landscape that had been cultivated for farming cattle and sheep, with stands of birches and black pines separating the pastures, the town center felt secluded and hidden, as if these expanses of nature protected it from the modern world. Yet in 1874 it had become accessible when the railway to Utrecht was constructed with a stop in Hilversum, only six kilometers away, on the far side of a heath that could be crossed by foot or bicycle.

Still, once Laren developed as a gateway for sophisticated people weary of the city, horse-drawn vehicles began to traverse the heath with whatever building materials were needed and the accouterments of luxurious living. The bourgeoisie like Greta Heijbroek's family built opulent country houses, while the artists mostly lived in cabins that also served as their studios. In 1909, Jan Sluijters had moved to the village, where he was quickly followed by painters working in a similar vein to him, and by the time Mondrian accepted Miss Hannaert's invitation, Laren was home to a lively artists' colony.[979]

In 1913, the novelist P.H. van Moerkerken published a parody of life in Laren called *De ondergang van het dorp.*[980] He depicts the factions that had developed in this unusual resort, with most people in town deeming the

[979] For Laren as an artists' colony, see Lien Heyting, '*De wereld in een dorp. Schilders, schrijvers en wereldverbeteraars in Laren en Blaricum. 1880-1920,* Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1994.

[980] P.H. van Moerkerken, *De ondergang van het dorp*, Van Kampen, Amsterdam 1913.

more avant-garde artistic movements as frivolous. Van Moerkerken's portrait of local tensions is accurate, even if it is slanted by his bias against everything he considers trendy. We see Sluijters and the other practitioners of the avant-garde painting style termed "luminism" offending more traditional local artists. The novelist mocks the landscapes composed in what, by Hague School standards, are garishly bright colors and pointless abstract forms. He mocks the world that had been Mondrian's in the past, the milieu where he now found his refuge in 1915. We encounter the many Theosophists—three of the fifteen regional centers in the Netherlands were located in the Laren region—and the enthusiasm with which they made a cult of the artist as a hero figure. Van Moerkerken is merciless about the 'fashionable nonsense' of these 'theosophists and their oriental whining about astral bodies and cosmic powers,' and he pokes away at the artists who make theosophic musing central to their art, and he treats the anarchists as simply being partisans of another fad.[981] Whatever one's opinions are of the new approaches to life and art that Van Moerkerken depicts with scorn, his portrait of the crosscurrents of energy in Laren is spot on. Mondrian's circle of friends were vehement in their passion for the occult and for art that evoked it, while most of the town's population, whether the wealthy holiday makers from Amsterdam whose houses stood empty on weekdays except in the summer, or the local farmers and shopkeepers, were aghast.

This was the first roman à clef about Mondrian. In the novel, he is named Nico Beukel. He paints an enormous triptych. Another of Van Moerkerken's characters, an enthusiastic critic, describes the 'white-pink holy nude figure'[982] that is its crowning glory. Mondrian had actually painted *Evolution* in Domburg and Amsterdam, and was still living in Paris in the time period when the novel takes place, but Van Moerkerken captures the high regard as well as the ridicule already focused on him before he moved there, into Hannaert's house, to stabilize his life until he might get back to Paris. Mondrian had been going to Laren ever since he first went to Greta Heijbroek's parents' villa there, in 1909. Before moving to Paris, he had periodically biked to the village with the painter Maurits de Groot, and his supporter H.P. Bremmer lived there. By the time Mondrian was actually living in the town, he was well known both in person and through his caricature in a novel that had become immensely popular.[983]

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Living in Catharina Hannaert's house, Mondrian needed a place to work. He took any nearby studio he could get at little or no cost, moving from one space to another as required. So that he could continue making the

[981] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp,* p. 142.
[982] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp,* p. 145.
[983] The above mentioned is mainly based on Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp,* p. 141-147.

monthly rent payments for his Paris studio, he accepted commissions according to the wishes of the few clients interested in conferring them when most people were distracted by the war engulfing the Netherlands' neighbors. He wrote Bremmer, who was back in Amsterdam for the winter, and who was always sympathetic to his situation, about his "triple work."[984] One part of consisted of the abstract paintings he would have liked to focus on to the exclusion of all other art. But, as when he was younger, he again had no choice but to do copies and portraits. The third part of his work was his writing.

Mondrian took it all in stride. Being in limbo, struggling to make ends meet, needing to pay for the Parisian home and workplace he could not get to, toughing it out in the free room for which he was grateful and any studio space that was cheap or free, Mondrian was quite okay. He by no means anticipated that he would be spending four more years ahead away from his home base. He was grateful for what he had.

#

The war intensified in the spring of 1915. Remaining exiled in the country to which he had vowed never to return for more than brief visits, Mondrian worked away on more large drawings based on the studies he had done the previous autumn in Domburg. Most evenings, he sat bent over a desk laboring on a book in which he elaborated the ideas he had written in his sketchbook. Hannaert's house was a godsend. Mondrian was also organizing what was to be one of his most major exhibitions to date—a three-artist show at the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring, putting his work with Peter Alma's and Le Fauconnier's (who also lived in the Netherlands during the war)—and he could do so from where he was.[985]

Few artists of Mondrian's caliber would have agreed to show their work with painters he must have recognized as les interesting or perhaps even inferior. But Mondrian accepted any opportunity to exhibit and sell his paintings. At every stage of his artistic development, he would be unfazed to have his paintings on view alongside those of his weaker look-alikes. In the early landscape days, it had been Simon Maris. A decade later, when his colors took off, it was Sluijters and Toorop. Now it was these two colleagues who were exploring Cubism in a less revolutionairy or competent way than he was. In the future, exhibiting his work alongside less powerful art by his fellow De Stijl painters, Mondrian would still appear impervious to the quality differences. He surely knew he was in a different league, but he reacted to the world outside of himself without ego. He was not competitive

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[984] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, January 16 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19.

[985] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 28. In July 1914, Le Fauconnier came to the Netherlands at the invitation of Kickert. A visit that would, thanks to the war, lasted until 1920. See Arnold Ligthart, 'Le Fauconnier en de Europese avant-garde', in: Arnold Ligthart, Wendela Schippers, *Henri Le Fauconnier. Kubisme en Expressionisme in Europa*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 1993, p. 43.

any more than he was ever in awe. Mondrian lived in an orbit in which he was the sole planet.

#

For the Rotterdam exhibition, Mondrian needed to get his collectors to lend paintings. Anna Bruin, who lived in The Hague, owned eight pictures and agreed to send all of them. One of them was the amazing *Woods near Oele.* It had, in 1908, been the first occasion of Mondrian's juxtaposing jet blacks and vibrant hues and applying paint to the canvas in full force; while larger, and more clearly representational of a knowable subject, it had been a breakthrough in his art, an advance toward his current degree of abstraction, and made a bridge between his earlier art and what he was now doing. Catharina Hannaert lent three, as did Van Assendelft. Otherwise, most of the twenty-five major pieces by Mondrian belonged to the artist himself. He had been storing them with friends and family in the Netherlands, and he hoped desperately to sell at least one of them. Eleven paintings dated back to Mondrian's period of more traditional naturalism, albeit with his unique approach. Fourteen were more recent works, some of them reflecting his foray into cubism, all coming from the show at Walrecht in The Hague.[986]

While the artist was scraping together funds just to survive, a sale of just one of the early pictures would be salvation. If only there was a client with the desire and money, he would be able to open a Dutch bank account. He had no such luck.

In March, the show traveled to Groningen to another painters' society, called *Pictura*.[987] There, too, nothing sold. Mondrian seemed unaware that the war might be a factor. As ever, he was in a shell, blind to the reality of other people's situations and priority. Sometimes that isolation from a certain reality protected Mondrian; in this case, it deprived him of the solace he might have felt if he had realized that the reason he was not selling paintings was because people were preoccupied with other matters, not that they disliked his art. He maintained his usual equilibrium, but he was disconcerted by his failure to sell even a single painting, when he was more and more desperate financially the longer he remained in the Netherlands. And he knew that his newer, less familiar way of painting would offer even less of a chance of solving his practical problems. Still, it gave him emotional ballast, and he persevered while living on a shoestring.

XII

Maaike Middelkoop was also rooming at no cost in Hannaert's house. In her early twenties, she was a bright and outgoing woman who commuted to Amsterdam for work, but preferred to live in Laren with its colony of artists

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[986] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 107.
[987] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 28.

and writers and musicians breaking the boundaries of human creativity. We have already encountered Middelkoop as the vivid raconteur of Mondrian's first meeting with Jakob van Domselaer, a few years earlier, in Miss Hannaert's city house in Amsterdam.

Mondrian and Middelkoop both knew they would have to move out of De Linden before the summer season in Laren began in July and Hannaert's guests started to arrive. Giving up free lodging, they had to find the cheapest possible places. Neither the urgency nor the absence of a real home troubled Mondrian, any more than did the lack of a life partner or of intimate friends, but he still needed a place to sleep and eat and set up his easel and paints.

Mondrian had decided that Laren was where he would camp out while waiting for a change in the situation created by the war. His friendship with Middelkoop helped. It allowed him to feel he was not completely alone, while it brought no obligations with it.

Mondrian and Middelkoop learned that two small rooms were available in a Laren boarding house where Jakob van Domselaer was living. Mondrian and Van Domselaer had kept up the friendship which had such a rocky start, and Mondrian had become fascinated by Van Domselaer's experimental approach to music, which was directly related to what he was trying to do in painting.[988] Middelkoop had her eye on the composer romantically. Other men might have felt a twinge of competitiveness or jealousy. Mondrian, however, was happy to make the move with Middelkoop knowing that he might soon be odd man out.

Once Maaike Middelkoop and Mondrian had moved to the pleasant farmhouse where Jakob van Domselaer was living, he managed to find a small studio in the nearby town of Blaricum. It had been built by Jacob van Rees. In 1897, Van Rees had founded the International Brotherhood, and two years later he had started a farming colony in Blaricum; the studio was on the colony grounds. Initially, it was intended to be used by his son, the painter Otto van Rees, but the younger Van Rees had moved away.

The legacy of his new work space was significant to Mondrian. Van Rees was convinced that education was the key to improvement for civilization in general. Besides the farming colony in Blaricum, in 1903, Jacob van Rees had created the Humanitarian School in Laren. This was a center for iealists who tried to make their social conscience determine every aspect of their existence. When Mondrian took the studio space, he knew it was not just a place to paint, but a structure built by someone whose ardent goal was the betterment of all humankind.

The purpose of working for the betterment of all human civilization was what Mondrian cherished above all else. It may sound simplistic, but it distinguished him from most other painters of his era, and certainly of our

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[988] Keziah Goudsmit, 'Finding Balance in Art and Music. Piet Mondrian and Jakob van Domselaer's First Compositions', in: Hans Janssen, *Mondrian and Cubism. Paris 1912-1914*, Ridinghouse, London 2016, p. 63-67.

own. The majority see art as a means of conveying their personal experiences and fulfilling their own needs more than those viewers they would never meet.

Van Rees's compound also brought Mondrian close to his brother Louis—the member of his immediate family about whom, unfortunately, the least is known. From 1915 to 1918, Louis Mondriaan was teaching at the Laren Humanitarian School. He taught geography, math, and drawing in accord with the educational philosophy of Jacob van Rees. As a person, Louis cut quite an image for himself. Considered a weirdo by his students, he had a long beard and mustache and almost always wore a brown Manchester of the type generally used by farmers, for whom its purpose was based on practicality more than style. This was well before the era of today's rustic chic—business people wearing fleeces and down vests and dogsledders' boots in the middle of cities— and everyone noticed it. Louis had a reputation for sleeping during class; he also smoked conspicuously, although it was strictly banned. His true passion was farming; he got up every morning at 4 a.m. to harvest vegetables from the school garden and pile them into his horse cart.[989] While his brother Piet would never get over his loathing of gardening and resentment toward the enforced hoeing and weeding in childhood, Louis had an insatiable fondness for the level of tasks their father had made them do.

Yet these two unusual sons of the same parents had in common that, whether advancing the art of painting toward pure abstraction or harvesting vegetables, they were performing a service for the world. Each was convinced that this is what we were put on earth for.

#

Middelkoop and Van Domselaer quickly paired up as both had hoped. They became a source of ballast in Mondrian's life. Mondrian's income was unpredictable while they both had steady jobs. Van Domselaer gave music lessons locally, while Middelkoop continued to work in a shop in Amsterdam. The young couple occasionally advanced Mondrian cash. They were happy to do so for a man they considered a genius, and who garnered their sympathy as a kind and quirky person in extenuating circumstances, but he was determined not to take advantage of their generosity. When Mondrian would be paid for one of his copies, he would put every single guilder into the coat closet of the boarding house where the three of them had rooms. He told his friends that he would not touch any of the money until they had taken out the total amount they had lent him as well as whatever they had spent for his share of the groceries.[990]

Middelkoop took the tram each day at 7 a.m., and returned at 7 p.m. Van Domselear was out all day seeing his students at their houses. This left no one to cook. Mondrian was known to be skillful in the kitchen, but he was

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[989] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 209.
[990] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 284.

not about to interrupt his painting to prepare dinner for the others every night. Broke as they all were, the three housemates, as well as Peter Alma, his wife, and the Schoenmaekers who lived nearby, pooled their resources to hire a farm woman, Heintje Smit-Boog, prepare their evenings meals.[991] Everyone shared the cost, and they lived like a commune. After decades of living alone, Mondrian flourished with this unintended change to his way of life.

Middelkoop provides an account of those evenings shared by people trying to make art and music on shoestring budgets during a world war.[992] Mondrian took a while to switch from his daytime quietude into a more sociable mood, but once he got going, he loved to talk. He monopolized the conversation. When Middelkoop went to bed ahead of the others in order to be ready to leave each morning at seven, she knew that Mondrian would keep the rest of them as late as he wanted. Like an elder statesman, he gave his discourses for hours on end. Van Domselear's latest ideas inspired him. Mondrian extrapolated from them passionately. Mondrian and Van Domselaer preferred to explore their related ideas on liberating art representation and music from melody than to sleep. They lived in a way like art school students, more interested in pushing ahead with their experimentation than worrying about the practicalities of life, or getting enough sleep. But, while the others were in their early twenties, Mondrian was forty-three years old.

#

Mondrian was not only the oldest, but also the most elusive of the circle who gathered around the boarding house dinner table. As in his childhood, he was the outsider: respected, but with his personal life impossible to fathom, and his philosophical musings on human existence and art often incomprehensible.

Saturdays were Mondrian's day for going to Amsterdam to work on his copies at the Rijksmuseum. Middelkoop describes him coming in late after one of those weekly outings. As he rushed by to go upstairs and wash and change for the evening meal, he turned his head and reported that he had procured an eel, and would be downstairs quickly.

It was a major event to have such a delicacy, although whether the eel was smoked or fresh remains unknown. The three of them ate it along with some sandwiches and tea, and stayed up so late savoring the elongated creature that they were all still in bed at noon the following day. They were then awakened by an unexpected visitor.

It was, according to Middelkoop, someone who came periodically but whom she and Van Domselaer 'didn't know very well.' When the person

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[991] Mandy Prins, 'Salomon B. Slijper (1884-1971)', in: Huibert Schijf en Edward van Voolen, *Gedurfd Verzamelen. Van Chagall tot Mondriaan*, Waanders, Zwolle 2010, p. 148. Cf. Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 180.
[992] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 284-285.

knocked at the door of Hannaert's house, Mondrian was the first to wake and head to the entrance. On his way, he called from the stairs that he would let the visitor in. Then Van Domselaer and Middelkoop heard Mondrian and the visitor go to the back of the house.

In the meantime Middelkoop went downstairs to Van Domselaer's room to ask what Piet was doing. A few seconds later Piet turned his head around Van Domselaer's door—Mondrian is often described with these little turns of his head—and, thinking Van Domselaer 'was alone in his room,' said, 'Don't rush – he went first to peepee.'

Then Mondrian saw Middelkoop in Van Domselaer's bed. At that point, he simply burst out laughing and entered.[993]

We are told nothing more. Who the visitor was, what he did next, why the visitor's trip to the bathroom matters, is never explained. Yet, Middelkoop thought these events worth recording fifty years after the fact.

The images of Mondrian on that early Sunday afternoon in Laren in 1915 intrigue me, which is why I have provided them for you. Maybe others will perceive something in Mondrian's behavior that I am yet to grasp. All what I can conclude is that he was amused by odd things, was bothered by just about nothing, and lived in his own universe, with friends but no intimates, and perhaps with secrets about which he had become quite comfortable.

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During that summer, all three housemates often had dinner at Miss. Hannaert, whose house was full of guests. One evening, when their hostess was present, Mondrian and Van Domselaer left dinner ahead of her. Middelkoop was furious. She told the men they were being rude to Miss. Hannaert, who after all, was succoring them as her guests. They had not even excused themselves politely: a demonstration to Middelkoop of their unconscionable arrogance. Mondrian was unfazed. He simply said that one of the people at the table had been speaking so cockily about art without knowing what he was talking about that he could not tolerate it for a minute more.

Middelkoop defended the man Mondrian found so offensive. He could be immensely funny she told Mondrian. Getting up and flouncing out, was much worse than anything Hannaert's other guests had said or done. Mondrian would not acquiese. He continued to attack the visitor and defend his action in the particular nasty and dismissive voice he used when he was on a rampage.

The following day, in his most withering manner, Mondrian instructed Middelkoop to stay longer than usual after dinner that night. Sneering, he told her that he and Jakob would leave early as usual, but she should remain. 'After all,' Mondrian remarked, the offensive guest would still be there, and

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[993] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 285.

Middelkoop liked the self-anointed art expert so much that she should stay to the bitter end.[994]

At moments like these, Mondrian was relentless, delighting in his own indignation like an angry adolescent determined to impose his sense of his own moral superiority.

#

This was not the only such incident in that period which was the closest thing to communal living Mondrian would ever experience. Most people respected him, but he was known to be capricious, and sometimes deliberately unpleasant without having the slightest discomfort himself. Middelkoop recalled an evening when Lodewijk Schelfhout's wife came for dinner, and Mrs. Schelfhout invited Van Domselaer to play some of his 'Proeven van Stijlkunst' at a soirée they would all be attending at the home of affluent Laren "society" people. These piano suites—their title translates as 'Experiments in Artistic Style'—represented the first attempt to apply to music the principles of what would soon be known as 'Neo-Plasticism.' The seven austere, mathematically based pieces were all inspired by Mondrian's painting and writing. The static elements in opposition to the 'peaceful and flowing' musical movement were equivalents to the juxtaposition of vertical and the horizontal in visual art; Van Domselaer had 'tried to translate into music [his] impression of Mondrian, both the man and his works."[995] One would have expected Mondrian to be enthusiastic about going to the soirée during which they were performed, and on his best behavior once he got there.

Yet when Mrs. Schelfhout suggested the performance, Mondrian belittled the idea. It was not out of disrespect for Van Domselaer; he simply hated the social pretentiousness of Laren's rich set. Still, he reluctantly agreed to attend.

The evening began with a speech from the hostess. She was the cliché of a "cultured lady," well-meaning but with airs. In the voice of a teacher informing uninitiated students, she stood in her lavish evening gown illuminating them about the upcoming performance and the latest developments in modern art. The woman radiated pleasure with what she considered her intellectual sophistication. The invitees were her friends, part of her social group, but it did not faze her to be patronizing to them. To her hand-culled audience in her opulent living room, she delighted in putting herself on the same footing as the artists and musicians who had come in from their simpler digs, assuming the role of spokesperson about recent advances in painting and musical composition, intolerably proud of her role.

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[994] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 283.

[995] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 134. For the mutual influence of Mondrian and Van Domselaer, see also Keziah Goudsmit, 'Finding Balance in Art and Music. Piet Mondrian and Jakob van Domselaer's First Compositions', in: Hans Janssen, *Mondrian and cubism. Paris 1912-1914*, Ridinghouse, London 2014, p. 63-67.

Middelkoop 'didn't dare to look at Piet.'[996] If initially she had expected the evening to go well, she knew that he was incapable of being charmed or even amused by self-importance. It was a trait he had in spades, but allowed in no one else. Middelkoop was miserable anticipating what Mondrian might do or say. The performance was important to Van Domselaer, who was far less established than Mondrian; Middelkoop dreaded the scene that would impede her lover's success.

As Middelkoop anticipated, Mondrian 'sat with a sullen face in the half dark conservatory.'[997] But the reason was not at all what she imagined. Mondrian had a problem that had nothing whatsoever to do with the wealthy, silly hostess carrying on unknowingly about his painting and its relationship to modernism and Van Domselaer's music in particular. Mondrian's issue was that the host, the speaker's husband, had just positioned himself next to a young girl who Mondrian was eying for himself.

Mondrian dealt with this the only way he could. Determined to shut out all that was bothering him, he let his eyelids close, and soon dropped his head, falling into a light sleep.[998]

Then the host took the floor from his wife. This scion of upper-class Dutch society read a story 'about a giant spider.' The man's voice woke Mondrian. Startled out of the nap from which he was escaping his jealousy over the fetching young woman, Mondrian shouted, loud and clear, 'Oh, God! How creepy!'[999] Everyone in the room heard his cry, and turned and—stared. The speaker then simply continued, as if nothing had happened, in the way of a savvy diplomat. Then Van Domselaer's music was performed to much acclaim. The evening ended without further incident, a resounding success for the young composer, and therefore for Middelkoop. She recognized that Piet Mondrian was simply the most unpredictable individual she had ever met.

XIII

In Laren, Mondrian's squeamishness about insects as well as farm animals became even more pathological than it had been when he was living in Uden and Oele and other rural locations.

The middle-aged man shrieking over a tale about a spider told on a social evening in someone's living room made a strong impression on all who witnessed the outburst. The aversion had become even more extreme than the fear of farm animals, that had astonished Van den Briel in Brabant. Given Mondrian's passion for natural beauty as manifest in the sea, the sky,

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[996] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 286.
[997] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 286.
[998] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 286.
[999] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 286-287.

and the forest, and his emphasis in his writing on all that comprises the cosmos, his phobias were startling.

One perfect springtime evening, Middelkoop and Mondrian were walking across the heath talking about the way appearances change in the moonlight. Suddenly Mondrian blurted out, "Nature's a damn lousy affair, when you think of it. It's almost unbearable to me."[1000]

Yet few artists in all of history had painted the effects of the sunlight more effectively. What caused him such pain that it was 'almost unbearable'? Was the reason the trauma that Phyllis Greenacre ascribed as the source of his consuming need to construct walls?

What is certain is that Mondrian loathed things that were beyond his control and for which he could not find a solution. It did not bother him to be stranded nearly a thousand miles from his real home as much as it did to have the light suddenly change in the evening sky when clouds rolled in, or to imagine a spider crawling.

He had to avoid what he could not control or fully understand. This meant sexual or emotional intimacy as well. His art was his refuge. It also provided a means of channeling his energy, taking change and creating a safe zone.

XIV

The group who assembled for evening meals cooked by Heintje Smit-Boog began to expand. What was in effect, a one-table, one-menu, low-price restaurant with good food and lively regulars attracted even more distinguished people.

Besides Mondrian and Van Domselaer, each a recognized pioneer in his field, and the other artists like Peter Alma, as well as the lively, forward-thinking women, the Theosophist Mathieu H. J. Schoenmaekers and the writer Adriaan Roland Holst joined the group. Maaike Middelkoop and the writer Jan Greshoff, were not only contributed to the animated conversation, but wrote pithy observations of their more famous companions, with Greshoff, a poet as well as journalist and critic, in his late twenties at the time, providing a vital portrait of Mondrian's interactions with Schoenmaekers, the one individual in the group who matched Mondrian for the originality of his intelligence and his personal force.

Greshoff describes Schoenmaekers as "a scientist and courteous dwarf."[1001] This highly intellectual man of midget proportions would, for the next two years, be a major figure in Mondrian's life. Schoenmaekers, who was forty years old when forty-three-year-old Mondrian met him, had

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[1000] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 287.

[1001] J. Greshoff, *Afscheid van Europa. Leven tegen het leven*, Nijgh & Van Ditmar, 's-Gravenhage/Rotterdam 1969, p. 109.

been ordained as a priest when he was twenty-four. Three years later, he officially resigned from the priesthood, declaring that the church abused its power. He subsequently joined the Theosofische Vereeniging, an organization comprised mainly of anarchists and socialists, and began to write and publish what were termed 'Christosophical' texts. These carefully considered essays merged Theosophy with certain Christian doctrines, with Schoenmaekers' own philosophy unifying approaches to God usually considered at odds with one another.[1002] By the time he moved to Laren in 1912, these texts had been widely disseminated, and Schoenmaekers had a considerable following all over the Netherlands.[1003]

When Mondrian met Schoenmaekers, the former priest, who never stayed long on a single tangent, had become obsessed with the teaching of mathematics. He decried the prevalent approach to this essential educational subject as inducing 'numbness of the senses … a serious disease from which clever people often suffered.' Mondrian was intrigued by Schoenmaekers' advocacy of 'visual mathematics'—which he also called "positive mystics"—over the current methodology. Schoenmaekers based his theories on his vision of nature as possessed of a 'hidden coherence.' He believed that a grasp of this splendid quality could provide humanity with a new and powerful emotional support structure that could supplant Christianity and other religions that were inadequate by comparison.[1004]

Most mathematicians rejected Schoenmaekers's ideas vociferously. Artists, however, embraced them—at least Mondrian and several others did.[1005] The idea of a higher order underlying life with all of its complexity, and of mathematical laws governing nature, excited them immensely and had a direct impact on their work. Mondrian's own thinking of the past several years was reinforced by Schoenmaekers's call for art to be 'liberated from individualism' in order to reveal a higher order and be possessed of grace. When the primary quest in life is for the universal and absolute, the personal is a burden: of this Mondrian and Schoenmaekers alike were completely certain.[1006]

In May of 1914, Schoenmaekers had given a lecture in Hilversum at the opening of a show of work by Lodewijk Schelfhout. Schoenmaekers said that the time had come for a new art that, rather than evoking the 'volatile moods' of Impressionism, would use 'solid lines and immutable laws' to

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[1002] For an introduction to the life and work of Schoenmakers see: Henk de Jager, Hendrik G. Matthes, M.H.J. Schoenmaekers, *Het beeldende denken. Leven en werk van Mathieu Schoemaekers*, Ambo, Baarn 1992.
[1003] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 197.
[1004] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 199.
[1005] Andrea Gasten, 'Pseudo-mathematica en Beeldende kunst', in: Carel Blotkamp, *Kunstenaren der idee. Symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland, ca. 1880-1930*, Staatsuitgeverij, Den Haag 1978, p. 59.
[1006] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 200.

create a 'calm-powerful rhythm' that would be 'generally applicable.'[1007] This idea of a universal art that could provide steadiness by countermanding the uncertainties of human existence corresponded with Mondrian's deepest beliefs.

In that autumn of 1915 when war raged through much of Western Europe, when Mondrian and Schoenmaekers talked night after night into the wee small hours of the morning, each had a soulmate.

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Schoenmaekers believed that reality could be expressed as a series of opposing forces. The polarity of horizontal and vertical axes, and primary colors juxtaposed to one another, are a visual representation of a formal order that underlies existence. In 1914, he articulated in his book *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld* (The New Image of the World), ideas very close to Mondrian's concerning the unity of opposites and of the vertical and horizontal as an expression of the male and female, and of the fusion that creates all of life.

Schoenmaekers writes, 'The two fundamental, complete contraries which shape our earth and all that is of the earth, are: the horizontal line of power, that is the course of the earth around the sun and the vertical, profoundly spatial movement of rays that originate in the centre of the sun.'[1008] He similarly stresses the importance of the primary colours: 'The three principal colours are essentially yellow, blue and red […] Yellow is the movement of the ray […] Blue is the contrasting colour to yellow […] is the firmament, it is line, horizontality. Red is the mating of yellow and blue […] Yellow "radiates", blue "recedes", and red "floats".'[1009]

Schoenmaekers posited a new image of the world, expressed with 'a controllable precision, a conscious penetration of reality and exact beauty.'[1010] Having talked non-stop when they first met in Laren nearly a year earlier, now that they were having dinner together nearly every night, Schoenmaekers and Mondrian continued their exploration of how to advance that new image of the world. For a while, Mondrian had a soulmate.

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[1007] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 200.

[1008] Schoenmaekers, *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld*, p. 102, as quoted from H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931. The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art,* J.M. Meulenhoff, Amsterdam 1956, p. 58.

[1009] Schoenmaekers, *Het Nieuwe Wereldbeeld*, p. 102, as quoted from Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931*, p. 60.

[1010] Jessica Helfand, 'De Stijl, New Media, and the Lessons of Geometry', in: Helfand, *Screen. Essays on Graphic Design, New Media and Visual Culture,* Princeton Architectural Press, New York 2001, p. 47-52. (www.typotheque.com/articles/de_stijl_new_media_ and_the_lessons_of_geometry).

Mondrian would eventually take from Schoenmaekers the term 'nieuwe beelding', which translates as "neo-plasticism."[1011] Schoemaekers had invented this term to explain the ideas he promulgated in *Beginselen der Beeldende Wiskunde* (Principles of Plastic Mathematics) which he had recently published. The person whose trenchant observations about Mondrian's derivation of certain ideas and vocabulary from that book and from the nightly conversations with Schoemaekers was Theo van Doesburg, who first visited Mondrian in Laren in February 1916, and subsequently wrote Antony Kok about it.[1012] Mondrian would use Schoenmaekers' term 'nieuwe beelding' in his first published work, the long essay '*De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst*' (The New Plastic in Painting), which would appear in twelve installments of the periodical *De Stijl* in 1917–18. Today that term—which, for me, is far less clear and telling than the art that falls under its rubric—has become one of the favorite labels of art history, inevitably linked with Mondrian even if Schoenmaekers's name is largely unknown. It is one of the ways that Mathieu Schoenmaekers is an unsung hero of modernism.

Schoemaekers described himself as 'christosophist' to indicate his peculiar mixture of Christianity and theosophy. The word 'christosophist' with a lower case "c" in distinction to the "Catholicism" in which he had been indoctrinated for the priesthood he had now relinquished. He was, he said of himself, 'thoroughly catholic and at the same time thoroughly anti-church and especially anti-Roman […] I am more catholic that the Roman church, more catholic that the Pope.'[1013] This immodest, self-assured philosopher had a particular impact on Mondrian because of his emphasis on the external in conjunction with the internal; just as he eschewed religious ritual as being more important to the acolyte than the world, he rejected meditation, emphasizing that the visualization of abstract ideas was essential to their being understood, and that contemplation required an external object in order to make someone truly present to himself. He disparaged inwardness. Mondrian responded to this by progressing in his own art from the representation of human beings who gaze into

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[1011] 'we already find this expression "de nieuwe beelding" in a text by Schoenmaekers, employed in a sense very near to the one, in which Mondriaan is to use it afterwards. It may thus be assumed, that Mondriaan did not only adapt the term "de nieuwe beelding" from Schoenmakers' writings, but that its content, its meaning and its intricate implication, its positive attitude towards life may also be traced back to the work of Schoenmaekers.' Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931*, p. 61.

[1012] Letter Theo van Doesburg to Antony Kok, February 7 1916. See Alied Ottevanger, *'De Stijl overal absolute leiding' De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en Antony Kok*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2008, p. 116.

[1013] M.H.J. Schoenmaekers, *Beginselen der Beeldende Wiskunde*, Dishoek Uitgeverij, Bussum 1916, p. 203. Translation quoted from: Michael White, *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*, Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York 2003, p. 25.

nothingness, into a void, while achieving awareness of their inner selves – the central figure of the "Evolution triptych" being a prime example – to making art that becomes a focal point, a visual achor, so that, whereas the individual may be in a state of uncertainty, the object on which she or he focuses provides all the sharpness and clarity and awakening that is unachievable within the self.

Schoemaekers also became a primary source of encouragement for Mondrian to commit his theories to written text.[1014] Schoenmaekers writes, 'a new insight into relative objectivity is growing strongly in present day humanity. This new insight must first be stated in words […].'[1015] That 'objectivity' would, for Mondrian, require the visual to be devoid of representation of the known natural world as we normally see it.

As was invariably the case when Mondrian grew too close to someone, the friendship between him and Schoenmaekers would eventually sour. For an intense if short spell, it was utterly pivotal to his development, but then Schoenmaekers would insist that the 'new fine art' could succeed only when it existed 'without words', just as Mondrian was trying to articulate his faith.[1016] His first public reading of the introduction to *The New Plastic in Painting* simply baffled its audience at the lodge Laren's Theosophical Society, but, since he was essentially tone-deaf to the reactions of others, he continued to write, publish and hold forth in public whenever he could. Mathieu Schoenmaekers went the opposite route.[1017]

XV

Philosophizing and writing were not Mondrian's only after-dinner activities. About once a week he left whichever location he was currently staying in—To Hannaert's, the boarding house—to go to the dance hall in the Hamdorff, one of Laren's grand hotels (Fig. 45). Two orchestras played. One was led by 'the well-known maestro Janos Joacksycoros […] and his black gagged band of musicantos.' The other was the house orchestra, conducted by a Hungarian violinist whose name, Zunky Joska, evoked the pace and playfulness of the music. To gypsy music and ragtime, the assemblage of artists, anarchists, and Amsterdam cosmopolites danced waltzes, tangos, and two-steps.[1018]

[1014] White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism*, p. 25.
[1015] Schoenmaekers, *Beginselen der Beeldende Wiskunde*, p. 53. Translation quoted from: White, *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*, p. 25.
[1016] White, *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*, p. 25.
[1017] White, *De Stijl and Dutch modernism*, p. 26.
[1018] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 181.

Fig. 45. Hotel Hamdorff, Laren, c. 1908 (photographer unknown)

The dancers' abilities and training varied greatly, but, most everyone on the dance floor moved in the proscribed style—except for Mondrian. He stood out conspicuously, and lots of people were flabbergasted by his dancing technique, although they did their best not to stare, and even, when some gazed at him in palpable astonishment, he was impervious to their regard.

Mondrian's style of dancing was 'geometric'—completely unlike anyone else's. Jan Greshoff was the person who used that term to describe Mondrian's peculiar way of moving and not moving at the same time. Greshoff claimed that Mondrian was as unusual and original a sight doing two-steps at the Hamdorff as his art was in the houses of its collectors. Greshoff observed Mondrian's individualism in 'the similarity between his way of life, his body movements, and his work;'[1019] Mondrian's particularities were evident at all times, but especially when he took to the dance floor at the Hamdorff. His method of moving was as 'stately': he moved only his feet, and held the rest of his body rigid, with his head tilted upwards. Even if it was supposed to be a fast dance, Mondrian went 'very slowly,' and, according to Sal Slijper, was 'so stiff on the dance floor […] you had the feeling he was wearing a corset.'[1020]

One evening, Mondrian went to a costume party at the Hamdorff on the arm of Mrs. Manus van der Pot. He was dressed as Pierrot, and she as Pierrette.[1021] Clad entirely in white, Mondrian had an air of intrinsic

[1019] Jan Greshoff, 'Schrijversdagboek: Piet Mondriaan', in: *Het Vaderland* January 24 1957.
[1020] Betty van Garrel, 'De Mondriaankenner. Salomon Slijper', in: *Haagse Post* June 27 1964.
[1021] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 209.

loneliness, in his slightly disconnected way of looking at other people, and in his unnatural posture. Like Watteau's Pierrot, he seemed, in spite of his will to have fun, lost in his own world, while trying to turn himself into a straight vertical line.

Helma Wolf-Catz, who grew up in nearby Blaricum and was a teenager in Mondrian's dancing days at the Hamdorff, would later remember hiding from him there. 'He was no matador,' she quipped. He made unabashed advances at her, acting unaware that she was nearly thirty years younger than he was, believing that his artistic renown would give him some allure. He had no luck: 'We laughed about Mondrian … I thought he was so unattractive that his brilliance could not seduce me,' she remembered decades later.[1022] She bore him no resentment, though; he was disconnected, not malevolent, and she had only fond memories of the unusual character who amused her and her friends.

And while Wolf-Catz would not consider dancing with such an awkward oddball, other girls would allow him to take them in his arms and lead them across the floor, however awkward his gait. When it happened, Mondrian was beside himself with pleasure. Herman Hana, an artist living in the region, described an evening at the Hamdorff when he and Mondrian and the collector Sal Slijper drank the local gin while Mondrian enthused about a twenty-year-old woman with whom he had just been dancing. Mondrian was ecstatic to have had 'such a naive, honest, cheerfully amenable child' in his arms as they moved around the floor.[1023] He wrote this to a friend, but Hana and Slijper, who witnessed the event, were not comfortable hearing Mondrian rave about how much fun he had had. They tried to turn the subject of their conversation to issues of art. But Mondrian could not be distracted from the only things that interested him. When Slijper prodded him about his painting, he would discuss only his "'pretty dancing shoes.'"[1024]

Middelkoop, who often went with him to the Hamdorff, said he was in good spirits whenever he had a young date. 'When I asked him, joking, how old the girl was this time, he smiled shyly, blinking his eyes: "I don't know, the younger the better; but she's very sweet."'[1025] Still, Mondrian did not relax. Even with one of his "sweet girls" in his arms, he was unfailingly serious when he was dancing. His back was, as ever, ramrod straight, his head inevitably cocked at the usual angle. He also never stopped gazing

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[1022] Helma Wolf-Catz, *Het doktershuis aan de Torenlaan*, 's-Gravenhage 1981, p. 42, as quoted from Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 232.
[1023] Letter Herman Hana to Victor van Vriesland, June 27 1917, as quoted from Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 232.
[1024] Letter Herman Hana to Victor van Vriesland, June 27 1917, as quoted from Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 232.
[1025] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 283-284.

upwards—rather than making eye contact with his partner. And he always made stylized steps.

His nickname was "The Dancing Madonna."[1026] He probably had no idea that this was what people called him. Even if he did, he would in all likelihood not have understood.

#

On August 19, 1915, Mondrian wrote Simon Maris that the work on his book was taking up all of his evening time in Laren. It was probably because it was a period when he could not find one of his lithe young ladies to dance with him. At the "little Paris at Hamdorff," he had not "found a suitable dancing partner: all the girls I had access to are rather fat!"[1027] Maris presumably knew some of the specifics of Mondrian's taste in women from their trip to Spain together twelve years earlier.

But the Hamdorff was about more than his companions for waltzes and foxtrots. When the guests there were not dancing, they would sit on white-painted chairs at white-painted tables. It was, of course, standard treatment of furniture for a country resort. But when Mondrian, a few years later, painted the chairs and tables and everything else in his Paris studio that same matte white, it may in part have been to conjure memories of the place where he felt so happy, regardless of the girls' figures.

When the men and women rose from those white seats, they all behaved quite formally, bowing as they greeted each other. Even Mondrian engaged in the usual greetings and social pleasantries. Everyone was cordial with everyone else, but there was a tacit understanding that they were all on the prowl. Mondrian like most of the men, would gaze toward the buffet where the bright lighting made it possible to study potential partners, and whisper to his companions about the conquests he hoped to make.

The usual reality of his life consisted of negotiating advance partial payments from collectors of his art, reworking the compositions of new canvases, or rewording a text about his artistic philosophy. He relished these evenings out which were his sole indulgence.

Besides, the dancing had an uncanny bearing on his art. Those moments when Mondrian moved his feet in measured steps forwards and backwards, the rest of his body so noticeably rigid, helped establish the rhythm and angles of the new world he was creating on canvas. Whatever the exigencies of life were as Mondrian remained in Laren while the world war droned on, as each summer approached, the Hamdorff was foremost in his thoughts; it was not just because he enjoyed himself so much, because it inspired him. That pleasure he felt when holding a woman in his arms and moving his feet as the music played was a reprieve from some of the exigencies of life, but so was his art, and they were interconnected. Rhythm and motion, and the relationship of the horizontal and the vertical—of the male and

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[1026] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 284.
[1027] Letter Mondrian to Simon Maris, August 19 1915, RKD #0257 inv.nr. 63.

female—in forms within his control, comprised Mondrian's happiest territory. Pleasure—safe, measured, yet, for all the restraint, euphoric—was his goal. He enjoyed it, modestly, for himself; more importantly, he wanted to create it in new ways that could benefit people universally.

On May 24, 1916, Mondrian wrote Slijper, 'On June 10 Hamdorff opens and then I want to be ready with my clothes!'[1028] He asked if he could keep a jacket he had borrowed from the collector. There would be outdoor dancing, requiring a layer of clothing that would keep him warm, as he often felt cold and did not want to risk chills and illness, and he was not about to show up looking shabby.

A year later, his standards were even higher. On May 4, 1917, anticipating Hamdorff even further in advance, Mondrian would write to Slijper, 'A suit becomes necessary now.'[1029]

There was no discrepancy between the charms of everyday life and the joyous world he was creating in his art. If what Mondrian was worrying about when aerial bombardment was overtaking much of Europe was the necessity of a good, well-fitting suit for the dance floor, that was how he survived.

XVI

For one two-week stretch in January of 1915, Mondrian was so desperately short of money that he had to leave Laren and go back to Amsterdam to fulfill an order to do a copy of a family portrait. He stayed with his brothers at Ringdijk 55. He was almost as excited by the 'free coffee, for as long as the work takes'[1030] that Willem and Carel were giving him as by the hundred and twenty-five guilders he would earn, he wrote Vicar Van Assendelft.

The payment for the copy of an old portrait did not, however, enable Mondrian to cover his combined Paris and Amsterdam expenses. On February 12, 1915, he resorted to asking Van Assendelft to send him some money. His demands were modest, but desperate. 'I do not need <u>much</u>. Therefore I wanted to ask if you could send me a bit.'[1031] Yet, as always, he hated to ask for a simple hand-out. He proposed to make some ceramic designs for Van Assendelft so he might earn rather than borrow the cash. He also suggested that the vicar select three pieces for himself out of the work he was storing from the exhibition Walrecht had in The Hague.

Van Assendelft agreed to commission the ceramics if not to take the paintings. Mondrian was delighted, writing his loyal patron that if he could

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[1028] Letter Mondrian to Slijper, May 24 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 149.
[1029] Letter Mondrian to Slijper, May 24 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 182.
[1030] Undated letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 8.
[1031] Undated letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, [February 1918], as quoted from Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 218, letter A5.

get similar commissions he might support himself exclusively by making ceramics until he returned to Paris. He was confident that this would be happening quite soon.

Meanwhile, he allowed to Van Assendelft that if the pastor might send '20 or 25 guilders now; at least if this does not disturb you,' it would be a godsend.[1032] It was the equivalent of asking for about two-hundred and twenty-five Euros today. In spite of his penury, Mondrian was in good spirits. He figured that, with a modest aid, as soon as he finished the portrait copy, he would return to the studio in Laren, and get back to work on his own art, without any obligation to do anything else. He had in mind a series of eight paintings. While he knew he would only work out the details when he actually created them, he could envision each of the different variations of what would be purely abstract compositions, closely related but with significant internal differences. Of course if he could get back to Paris, he would do them there instead, but he was matter-of-fact about the question of where he would paint these canvases. 'I hope the Germans will soon be exhausted, but it might take quite some time, maybe!'[1033]

#

Mondrian had not been realistic in thinking he could afford not to make copies. On August 9, of 1915, he registered in the Rijksmuseum Copybook again. When he had moved to Paris three and a half years earlier, Mondrian never anticipated that he would return to aspects of the life he thought he had left behind forever; now here he was in his old haunt, at his old job.

Mondrian's task was to make a copy of Adriaen Cornelisz. Beeldemaker's *The Hunter* (1653). He was pleased to have the assignment; it would be, he hoped, exceptionally lucrative.[1034]

The facsimile had been commissioned by W.J. (Willem) Steenhoff, a well known critic and deputy director who had in the past often procured assignments for Mondrian to do copies at the Rijksmuseum and now had landed, as Mondrian's client, a rich German in Hamburg who was to pay him five hundred guilders.[1035] After a week with his father in Arnhem, Mondrian returned to Amsterdam to begin. This required his staying in Amsterdam from every Monday to every Friday—and returning to his room in the boarding house in Laren and his studio there only on weekends. But at least he had Saturdays and Sundays to devote to his own art and to dance at the Hamdorff. The impact of the war did not trouble him.

[1032] Undated letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, [February 1918], as quoted from Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 218, letter A6.
[1033] Undated letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, [February 1918], as quoted from Joosten, *Brieven Mondriaan aan Van Assendelft*, p. 218, letter A6.
[1034] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 108.
[1035] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, September 2 1915, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 2.

Willem Steenhoff was an impressive character: a stalwart of the Amsterdam arts establishment who had made his way into its elite confines from a very different milieu of Dutch society. Ten years Mondrian's senior, he had been born in Utrecht, where his father was a blacksmith, and his first job was as a low level worker in a cigar factory. But he made his way into the local museum whenever he could, and soon its director, David van der Kellen, helped him get into the Amsterdam Art Academy. Then he married Van der Kellen's daughter, Cornelia. Steenhoff became as much of an art critic as an artist. He had exceptional taste. He became a specialist in the fascinating early 17th century Dutch artist Hercules Segers, a favorite of modern artists, and, while furthering his studies of Van Gogh and Cézanne, got a job for the Rijksmuseum. He became both an important critic and deputy director of painting at the Rijksmuseum. He would ultimately fail in his effort to develop a permanent Van Gogh collection at the Rijksmuseum, but organized major Van Gogh shows, and succeded in being one of the rare art critics to emphasize looking rather than the development of verbiage as essential to the appreciation of art, and to focus on the revelation of absolute beauty and truth, with the same abiding focus as Mondrian's.[1036]

Mondrian had known Steenhoff at least since 1910. We know that from a postcard he sent the museum curator from Leiden, devoid of text except that, on the face of the card, underneath the image of "Prajna Paramita,"—described as
'*d.i. de bovenaardsche wijsheid, de samenvatting van de geestelijke en physieke macht over de stof, de moeder der natuur*' and that translates as 'this is the supernatural wisdom, the summary of the spiritual and physical power over the substance, the mother of nature,' Mondrian has written 'Piet.' He has also drawn strong horizontal lines, in the same black ink as his name, over the N and A of Prajna and the last A of Paramita.[1037]

In 1912, Mondrian had sent Steenhoff again a postcard, this time from Paris, of a bronze statue of the Egyptian queen Isis, from the Petit Palais, and a warm text expressing regret not to be able to attend a party in Steenhoff's honor.[1038] That July, he sent another card from Paris, of Mantegna's Calvary at the Louvre, writing about travel plans and his hope of seeing Steenhoff in August following a visit to Pieter Mondriaan in Arnhem.[1039] The next card he sent from the rue du Départ showed another Egyptian statue at the Louvre, and the following one a Gauguin of three

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[1036] Steenhoff, Wilhelmus Johannes "Willem", in *Dictionary of Art Historians* (https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/steenhoffw.htm)
[1037] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, November 19 1910, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 1.
[1038] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, April 23 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 2.
[1039] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, July 5 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 3.

Tahitian women.[1040] The one after that was a superbly refined statue from Delphi, and then Pisano's 'Princesse d'Este' from the Louvre.[1041] The messages are insignificant—although one card in November of 1912, mentions the visit of 'my friend the forester and his wife,'[1042] with two more showing archaic bronzes from the Louvre.[1043] It was so rare for Mondrian to reveal his taste in figurative art that his choice of these objects, all exquisitely refined, is exceptional, reflecting a rapport over ancient art rare in Mondrian's way of connecting to other people.

The support and understanding he was receiving from Steenhoff was a major factor in Mondrian's ability to proceed undaunted by life's vicissitudes. Like Van Assendelft and Bremmer, Steenhoff had a rare understanding of Mondrian's skills and depth, and was eager to help him. Here was yet another generous believer who provided the backbone of an existence that might have otherwise been untenable. Lifelong, Mondrian would endure financial hardship, but what was equally consistent was the presence, of these indispensable angels who never flaunt their kindness or demanded anything in return.

In a letter to Bremmer, Steenhoff astutely described their mutual hero: 'As the work is, so is the person. As an artist he may well have - or rather he certainly has - the purest soul of his generation. Perhaps it is fair to say that his [...] adherence to his principles tends toward the maniacal. In any case, he displays a fanatical tenacity regarding what he considers true and pure. This is most disadvantageous to him in daily life, as his extreme discretion and modesty make it hard for him to act in his own interests.'[1044] Mondrian had no inkling of how lucky he was, how rare this compassionate understanding of his fanaticism was.

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On August 19, Mondrian wrote to Simon Maris that he had 'seven accommodations.' Besides 'three houses in Laren, one where I eat and one where I work and one where I sleep,'[1045] he was referring to the places in Amsterdam where he slept (he did not identify it), ate—meaning his

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[1040] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, July 19 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 4; Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, September 30 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 5.

[1041] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, November 6 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 6; Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, November 13 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 7.

[1042] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, November 13 1912, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 7.

[1043] Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, January 15 1913, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 8; Postcard Mondrian to Willem Steenhoff, February 24 1913, RKD #0171 inv.nr. 9.

[1044] Letter from W.J. Steenhoff to H.P. Bremmer, March 17 1916, as quoted from Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p.. 217-218.

[1045] Letter Mondrian to Simon Maris, August 19 1915, RKD #0257 inv.nr. 63.

brothers' flat—and worked (the Rijksmuseum). The seventh was Paris. Mondrian tallied them as a polite means of declining Maris's invitation to stay with him as well.

It was a bold decision. In those circumstances, most people would have accepted Maris's offer. He had a large apartment, and was a generous host. But Mondrian preferred his independence as a vagabond. Most people enumerating their real estate would have been boasting; Mondrian was in fact charting his existence as a perpetual camping trip, making clear that it suited him.

He could survive his exile from Paris as long as he had no incursions on his freedom to advance his art. Fortunately, reproducing Beeldemaker's painting had been more than a means of making money. The canvas from 1653 is beautifully composed, with the sleek white coats of the hunting dogs evoked in all their sheen. The black accents of the hunter's hat and the very long barrels of his rifle punctuate the whole, as do the black spots along the ridge of one of the dogs' backs. It is rhythmic, orderly, and articulate. Even if in his own work Mondrian was moving as far as possible from the natural world so painstakingly illustrated in seventieth-century painting, the formal qualities and color contrasts of Beeldemaker's hunting scene provided the same vitality and sense of clarity he sought in pure geometry. As always, Mondrian seized what was optimal even in a situation he would have preferred to avoid. He was using the qualities of representational art to move forward in a new domain that evoked only the formal qualities and completely eliminated the narrative. He had to do so at his own pace, which is why he declined Simon Maris's invitation in a jest implying that he was living comfortably when in fact he had next to nothing.

In that same letter to Maris on August 19, 1915, Mondrian wrote that he hoped to be back in Paris the following winter and was working to finance the move. Once he finished the copy of the Beeldemaker, he would have to do a portrait for which he would be paid two hundred and fifty guilders. 'For the rest I am still working on my own abstractions: in spite of everything, I am going ahead with what I enjoy doing,' he wrote his friend.[1046]

Few people who have so lightly characterized the goals of their existence and their personal obsessions as what they 'enjoy doing.' But for Mondrian, it was that deliciously simple. He had become his father's opposite, inside and out, his flippancy and playfulness not a mask, but part and parcel of his discovery of how one might live. Mondrian's approach to existence depended on the understanding that what is utterly serious need not flaunt its own importance, but can be presented with grace and legerdemain.

Mondrian was in high spirits. A major magazine piece about his work was scheduled to appear the next month; he told Maris how pleased he

[1046] Letter Mondrian to Simon Maris, August 19 1915, RKD #0257 inv.nr. 63.

was.[1047] The words 'despite everything' were apt; neither the realities of wartime nor the persistent antipathy to abstraction, would keep him down.

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It was not long, though, before Mondrian's financial situation became truly untenable. On September 2, he wrote Van Assendelft that before he could move back to Paris he would have to pay a year's rent in advance, on top of what he was already sending his landlord. He was hoping his landlord would drop the demand, or at least reduce it, but in the meantime it was essential to receive the five hundred guilders he was owed for the copy on which he had slaved all summer. He was worried that, if the Dutch entered the war, he would have trouble getting payment from his client, who lived in Germany. The Kunstkring had now folded—Mondrian blamed Kickert for this misfortune—which meant he could no longer anticipate selling some of his paintings in its annual shows. Nothing about the reality of the war or its effect on travel concerned him, but he was consumed by his financial situation. Until that money came in from the man in Hamburg, he was dependent almost entirely on the modest amounts he received from Van Assendelft. He longed to get back at least to Laren, even if he could not afford Paris at the moment, so he could make his own work. Mondrian was desperate—a rare state for him.[1048]

His rising critical success was nice, but it did not pay the bills. Still, in November of 1915, when a laudatory article appeared, it raised Mondrian's spirits at the exact moment when he was fretting about rent payments and worrying about when and how he might get back to Paris. The lengthy piece about him was published, with a considerable dely and shortened, in *Elsevier's Geillustreerd Maandschrift*, a popular illustrated magazine known for its independent point of view on current cultural and political developments.[1049] The gifted critic, Augustine de Meester-Obreen, succeeded in explaining to the general public the way that, from the start, Mondrian's differing styles of painting were part of a search to show, in 'the most powerful way, his sensations of the spirit.'[1050]

Writing about Mondrian's exhibition at the Rotterdamsche Kunstkring from earlier that year, De Meester-Obreen traces the progress from 'The oldest works at the exhibition were impressions of greyish-brown landscapes' to 'still-lifes in pure, luminous colors and clear, sober lines (to) an old village church in Zeeland (1911) loomed up in strong violet shadow

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[1047] Letter Mondrian to Simon Maris, August 19 1915, RKD #0257 inv.nr. 63. The article to which Mondrian referred in advance was: A.O. [A. de Meester-Obreen], 'Piet Mondriaan', in: *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 25(1915)50; 11 (November), p. 396-399.

[1048] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, September 2 1915, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 2.

[1049] De Vries, *Van sintels vuurwerk maken*, p. 192.

[1050] A.O. [A. De Meester-Obreen], 'Piet Mondriaan', in: *Elsevier's Geïllustreerd Maandschrift* 25(1915)50; 11 (November), p. 396-399.

against a pale, pale sky.'[1051] She identifies Mondrian's progressive heightening of color as coinciding with an intensification of emotions: both the artist's own feelings, and the responses the paintings inspire in the viewer. De Meester-Obreen writes, 'In a dune landscape he departed from natural colors. He painted the dunes pure blue, like a gently rising wave of crystalline water in which the sky is reflected, because blue is better than the yellow of sand for expressing the purity of what he saw. There was a soothing tranquility to the canvas, giving one a strong sense of spiritual purity and clarity.'[1052]

At any moment in his life, Mondrian would have been pleased to be understood as he was by De Meester-Obreen. Now—because of his dire financial circumstances and dislocation as well as his wish to push his art in entirely new directions while being recognized as the same person he had always been, his goals unchanged even if the appearance of his work was changing radically—the writer's perspicacity meant that much more to him. De Meester-Obreen correctly observes that initially Mondrian tried to reveal 'The essence of things using natural painterly techniques.' She also trenchantly observes 'He sought to evoke thoughts of death and life with a large, white, dying chrysanthemum, seen against a pale background beside a black curtain. The flower was like the ghost of a skeleton in profile, the green leaves drooping like spectral arm-bones, while there, up against the frame, rose its tender, almost ethereal bloom, its petals partially wilting along the stem, partially closed in a gentle inward curve. And the daylight passed over it like a soft breath of air. It was as fragile as a soap-bubble, or as mist and moonshine; as unreal as an apparition.'[1053]

When the critic leaps to Mondrian's recent developments, she is even sharper. She explains to the readers of this large-circulation publication that Mondrian had found 'All the external things, such as light, tone, mood, atmosphere'—increasingly 'cumbersome' as he concentrated on 'the inner.' De Meester-Obreen elucidates the way that Mondrian eliminated natural forms from his work because they overshadowed the inner. The rhythm of things, which was logical, became the main issue. 'Mondriaan [the spelling used in this article] believes that logic is becoming an exigency of the modern age; furthermore, in view of the arbitrariness of nature, he assumes that art will move further and further away from nature and the picturesque.' The critic cites Mondrian's opinion that all people's thinking would 'become increasingly abstract, he believes that abstract art is the art of the future.'[1054]

De Meester-Obreen articulates the work Mondrian had done since returning to the Netherlands in a way that people could understand. It was no mean task, and it still succeeds today. 'In his recent canvases, which are

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[1051] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 397.
[1052] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 397.
[1053] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 397.
[1054] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 397-398.

comprehensible, he arrives at compositions that are entirely free from subject-matter: considered arrangements of vertical and horizontal lines in certain proportion and rhythm and juxtaposition, not at random but in relation to one another, for the purpose of portraying a visual experience of beauty. Thus he calls his art spiritual, though not in the common religious sense. He seeks to visualize true spirituality, not a spiritual concept.'[1055]

De Meester-Obreen reproduced in color Mondrian's *Composition No. IV*, 1914.[1056] The critic gives advice on how to look at the painting. 'One needs to stand in front of it unprejudiced, independently from traditional thoughts, and have to let it soak.' She assures the viewer that the result of this simple task will be 'a pleasant feeling of rhythm, of rhythmical line movement, of rhythmical space and of beauty, proportions pleasing the eye.'[1057] De Meester-Obreen's council is as pertinent today as it was when she proffered it a century ago.

This exceptional critic emphasizes the sheer pleasure provided as a result of Mondrian's behind-the-scenes labors, and the personal gain to the patient viewer. She writes in particular of the large drawing where there is a lot of white background, like 'Composition No. IV.' 'Observing these drawings at length, you find that they emanate a sense of purity and candor; there is a serene openness reminiscent of certain highly intense sounds of pure music, or of clear, harmonious, restful thoughts. It takes a while for these things to sink in. But you can't expect something that took the artist years of hard work and determination to achieve to be evident at first sight. This art of Mondriaan's might be described as the art of good proportions and linear rhythm, which amounts to beauty in its simplest state.'[1058]

That straightforward exegesis written by an exceptional critic, today scarcely known, aptly sum up the artist's intentions and the reason Mondrian's art has its universal, timeless appeal. Given all the acres of less lucid critical material that have followed it, throughout the intervening hundred years but most especially in the last forty, it stands out. Not only is it still illuminating, but it has the added value that gave an artist a shot in the arm precisely when he needed it.

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When she was writing her article, A. de Meester-Obreen posed some questions to Mondrian in a letter. Mondrian jumped at the chance to answer them, writing her twice in response. There was little that the forty-three-year-old artist liked more than explaining his artistic intentions to sympathetic ears. In this period when he felt as if he was living in seven different places, and had the 'day job' of copying a seventeenth-century

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[1055] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 398.
[1056] B46 *Composition No.IV / Compositie 6,* 1914, oil on canvas, 88 x 61 cm, Gemeentemuseum.
[1057] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 398.
[1058] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 398.

painting while maintaining his scattered existence, Mondrian still found time to articulate his musings with care:

'Emotion is more superficial than the mind. The mind constructs and combines, whereas emotion expresses mood etc. The mind constructs the simplest line in the purest manner, and uses only the most primitive color. The most primitive color is the most deep-seated: the purest.

I am not renouncing color, I just want it to be intense as possible. I am not neglecting the line, but want it in its most forceful expression. The supple line in the natural appearance of things amounts to a slackening of the form. You say that some people who don't understand me have the impression that I discount the divine cause of the aesthetic sensation, i.e. that which is visible, in favour of something I myself have abstracted from the outward appearance.

I can see why this impression exists, but it is not the case.

Because it is in portraying the outward appearance of things (in their *normal* guise) that opportunities arise for the human element, the individual, to reveal itself, whereas when one portrays the interior of things, notably by means of abstraction from the external shape, one comes closer to revealing the spiritual, i.e. the divine, the universal.

To us as individuals this universal or general aspect appears colder and less sensitive than the particular, which is more in line with our humanity. The same goes for what you say about observing a flower. It surprises you that I should wish to dissect such delicate beauty and transform it into vertical and horizontal lines. I can understand your surprise, *but portraying that delicate splendour is not what I am after*. That which we perceive as beautiful in a flower, and which does not arise from the depths of its form and color, is admittedly beautiful, but it is not the *ultimate* beauty. I, too, can appreciate the superficial beauty of a flower, but there is a more profound beauty concealed within it. I had yet to discover how to visualize this when I painted that wilting chrysanthemum on a long stalk.

I portrayed it by emotion, and that emotion was human, possibly even common to all humans. Later on, I thought there was *too* much emotion in it, and I did a blue flower in *a different way*. This one retained its staring, stark quality, and already came a bit closer to immutableness. But to me the colors, although already pure, were still too expressive of individual emotion. I then had a phase of sober colors: grey and yellow, and tried to be bolder in my use of line. *Gradually* I arrived at the use of *almost* exclusively vertical and horizontal lines.'[1059]

Rarely did Mondrian allow such access to his fascinating thinking, and reveal his conscious flight from individualism to larger universal truths. Moreover, Augustine de Meester-Obreen concludes her piece with her own summation, a further quotation from Mondrian, and a fascinating bit of

[1059] Letter from Mondrian to A. de Meester-Obreen, [1915], as quoted in A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 398-399.

information: 'An urge for inner revelation drove him. "This is", he writes, "the same as spiritual - likewise as religious revelation." He would have loved to become a vicar, later also music conductor.'[1060]

If we imagine Mondrian preaching from the pulpit, or waving a baton with his hand, we picture him as he saw himself. He wielded a brush instead, but the passionate urge to lead people to a spiritual, melodic state was the same.

XVII

The imminent return to Paris Mondrian had imagined was a fantasy. There was no end in sight to his exile and his need to figure out how to find living and working space in Laren. He certainly could not make anything his own; wherever he could find shelter, and any form of studio, he had to accept other people's furniture and aesthetic choices. These uncertain circumstances outside his control only strengthened his resolve to find stability in his art and thinking.

While he lived like a refugee on the run, a lot was coming together for him. His new paintings, the exchange of ideas with Schoenmaekers, and the book on which he worked most evenings except when he went dancing, were of a piece. And there was a surprising benefit to being back in the Netherlands, even though not by choice; his support system was strengthening.

De Meester-Obreen was not the only person to offer Mondrian invaluable understanding during that difficult summer of 1915. The thirty-one-year-old Salomon B. Slijper, a successful real estate agent, was on holiday in Laren. Slijper booked into Miss Hannaert's pension. He was quickly riveted by a painting by Mondrian Hannaert had hanging in her living room, and could not take his eyes off of them.[1061] Hannaert told her guest that the man who painted them had been staying in the pension when it was closed in the winter, but could not afford it in the summer when paying guests like Slijper were there. He was, she added, staying in a boarding house nearby. Slijper said he wanted to meet the artist and buy some of his work.

It was the first time Mondrian met this man whose patronage would eventually be his life line. But from the start, theirs was not an easy relationship. Slijper did not want the paintings Mondrian would have preferred him to buy. The businessman was interested only in the earlier work Mondrian had done before going to Paris, early 1912. Still, Mondrian needed to sell anything he could. And once Slijper decided to form a collection of a lot of these figurative paintings with the intention of keeping

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[1060] A.O., *Elsevier*, p. 399.
[1061] The painting was *Composition No.IV*, see: Prins, *Slijper*, p. 148.

them together under one roof, Mondrian embraced the project. He sent Slijper to Anna Bruin, knowing that she might want to sell one or more of hers, and would have leads for others. Mondrian also asked Simon Maris to be on the lookout for other early paintings for sale.[1062] But Mondrian knew from the start that Slijper was a bargain hunter determined not to pay full freight, and warned everyone—often with an anti-Semitic barb about his patron's money grubbing.[1063]

Mondrian did not like Slijper for various reasons. His collector's reluctance to consider the recent work was as much of an irritant as his expecting wholesale prices when he bought in bulk. One wonders how he would have felt if he knew that, ultimately, Salomon Slijper, by donating his fantastic holdings of Mondrian's work to the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, would be one of the people most responsible for preserving Mondrian's art for all time.

Collectors who Mondrian deemed kinder and braver bought his newer, groundbreaking work. In October 1915, Schelfhout organized an exhibition at the Stedelijk which included recent paintings by both of them along with those of Sluijters, Gestel, and Le Fauconnier, and the architect J.C. van Epen. At its opening, Bremmer bought *Composition 10 in Black and White* for Helene Kröller-Müller.[1064] To have one of the Netherlands' most prominent collectors of modernism, advised by the leading aficionado of the new art, purchase his most daring painting to date, was probably life-changing. Mondrian was unusually pleased with his latest achievement, but he had no doubt that to most people it was unfathomable. The endorsement from two such esteemed people, and the sale at a time when the war had almost brought the art market to a standstill, were giant steps.

XVIII

In the course of that five-artist exhibition at the Stedelijk, a character entered Mondrian's life who seemed, to an astonishing degree, to share many of his beliefs and desires. He had never imagined there would be someone whose intellectual camaraderie would assume such importance for him. Moreover, it soon became evident that, even if this fellow artist considered himself

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[1062] Postcard Mondrian to Slijper, September 14 1915, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 139.

[1063] 'Slijper is wel een jodenman maar toch niet alledaagsch; hij ziet wel goed maar natuurlijk is een groot deel speculatie. Hij kocht vroeger veel van me, voor lage prijzen wel maar dat was in die tijd toch beter; anderen kochten heelemaal niet. […] Soms neemt hij van anderen iets over maar tegen een kleine prijs.' Letter Mondrian to Van den Briel, 1925 [no date], as quoted from Henkels, *groote eenheid*, p. 12.

[1064] B79 *Compositie 10 in Zwart Wit*, 1915, oil on canvas, 85 x 108 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum.

more a colleague than an acolyte, he perceived Mondrian as the reigning genius of the major new art movement they would found together.

Theo van Doesburg, eleven years Mondrian's junior, was a painter, poet, and writer. He lived in Utrecht, and, after seeing the above mentioned Stedelijk show, he wrote Mondrian asking the older artist to send him some works. He did not make the purpose clear; he seemed simply to want them for his own observation. Mondrian replied that he had nothing available. It was a polite response to an outrageous request from someone he had not even met. But Mondrian was tactful. He sent Van Doesburg a photo of a drawing of a church façade he had contributed, that August, to an album which had been put together for Queen Elisabeth of Belgium to thank her for working to defend the Belgian people.[1065] Mondrian wrote Van Doesburg, 'As you see, it is a composition of vertical and horizontal lines which (in an abstract way) is meant to express the idea of rising, of greatness. The same idea which was behind the building of cathedrals.'[1066] He goes on to explain that it is the rendering, not the representation, that reveals his intentions. This is why he kept the drawing untitled. It would, Mondrian added, appeal to 'an *abstract* human mind. I always concentrate on expressing the universal, i.e. the inner self (which is closest to the soul), and do this in the most simple external form in order to express the inner self in the least veiled way.'[1067]

Van Doesburg admired Mondrian's objectives and achievement, so much so that he was undaunted by the receipt of a photographic reproduction in lieu of original art works. He wrote a poem 'Cathedral I' and dedicated it to Mondrian.[1068] Excited to have an unknown colleague say as much, longing for a soulmate, Mondrian's heart kept with you. He wrote this other artist he was yet to meet with great excitement: 'Your verse has the same will as my work does … [it] expresses the abstract just as I do.'[1069]

Van Doesburg reviewed the Stedelijk show that October in the weekly journal, *Eenheid*, to which Mondrian had subscribed in 1910: 'To limit his means to so little, using only white paint on a white canvas with some

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[1065] B72 *Church Façade 7*, 1915, Whereabouts unknown.
[1066] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, [no date; October 1915], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.
[1067] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, [no date; October 1915], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.
[1068] Unfortunately this poem has not been puiblished and is lost. See L128 *Kathedraal I*, October 1915 in: Els Hoek (red.), *Theo van Doesburg oeuvre catalogus*, Centraal Museum/Kröller-Müller Museum, Utrecht/Otterlo 2000, p. 654. Cf. Alied Ottevanger, *'De Stijl overal absolute leiding' De briefwisseling tussen Theo van Doesburg en Antony Kok*, Uitgeverij THOTH, Bussum 2008, p. 99-105.
[1069] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, [no date; October 1915], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

horizontal and perpendicular lines, yet end up giving us such a pure artistic expression, that is extraordinary.'[1070]

Van Doesburg was an evangelist of the type Mondrian had known since his early childhood. He jumped at the chance to have him as a spokesman for the avant-garde approach they both championed. While Mondrian was committed to expressing his ideas in his art and his writing, he did not have his father's same need to spearhead a movement and convert the ignorant; Van Doesburg, however, was like Pieter Mondriaan and some of Pieter's colleagues in his drive to spread the word and enlarge the circle of believers. He gave lectures on the new approach to painting, poetry, and architecture, and was planning a periodical devoted to the cause. Now more realistic in his demands, he asked Mondrian for photos so he could make slides for the lectures, and asked Mondrian to join forces with him on the magazine. A movement was being born—with the hope that its approach would become widely diffused and begin to change painting, building, and design at every level and in all places.

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Van Doesburg and the small elite of artists and critics who were his colleagues faced an uphill battle for tolerance of their new cause. To get endorsement and support would be even harder. They knew that Mondrian's involvement was essential if they had a prayer of succeeding. Both he and his work already had an international reputation. The response to his work was not always positive, and he struggled to sell anything other than the canvas Bremmer had bought for Helene Kröller-Müller, but he had notoriety, and assured the movement attention.

At the end of the year, Bremmer gave an important lecture at a congress organized in the Concertgebouw of Amsterdam. He focused on that painting he had placed in the Netherlands' leading collection of contemporary art, bought for Helene Kröller-Müller, the *Composition 10 in Black and White*. The public was outraged when he showed them a photographic image of the simple oval with nothing but thin black horizontal and vertical dashes scattered in no discernable pattern on a matte white background. As Bremmer defended the Zen-like qualities of the canvas that represented no known reality, the audience shouted and booed. Still championing that one painting, Bremmer advanced the case for many of the values of the new movement Van Doesburg intended to codify with his magazine, and the message was heard.

In July 1916, in the illustrated periodical *Beeldende Kunst*, Bremmer would record, next to a reproduction of Mrs. Kröller-Müller's painting, a lot of

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[1070] Theo van Doesburg, 'Kunst-kritiek. Moderne kunst. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. Expositie Mondriaan, Leo Gestel, Sluijters, Schelfhout, Le Fauconnier', in: *Eenheid: weekblad voor maatschappelijke en geestelijke stroomingen* 6(1915-1916)283, November 6, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 109.

what he had said at the Concertgebouw. 'If one asks oneself if this is movement or rest, war or peace, agitation or tranquility, most will choose the last of these three comparisons. […] It expresses the smooth white mood of a Christmas evening […] a much more beautiful and subtle image than a landscape with snow and a cross, etc., as a former generation once imagined it.'[1071] If Helene Kröller-Müller's friends who attended Bremmer's lecture concluding that she was out of her mind to acquire the canvas, and thought Bremmer's reflections were as crazy as the painting itself, Mondrian had written him, at the start of 1916, to say that the Christmas and snow references, which Bremmer had first made in the lecture, made complete sense.[1072] It was the same line of thought that had led him to his first recitation in French, and that, even if it brought Van Domselaer to the brink of uncontrollable hilarity in its earnestness, captured the purity Mondrian sought. Besides, when Mondrian had spent Christmas and the New Years at the end of 1915 with his family in Arnhem, he felt a rare calm in spite of all the exigencies of his existence. He had his supporters and an easy enough relationship with his family. In a tumultuous period, the practical aspects of his life daunting, his personal relationships all at arm's length, his finances no more certain than the questions of where he might next seek food and shelter, his art gave him ease and strength. The knowledge that it had a profound impact on other people, even if only a few, was great solace. Buffeted about, he still had a sense of richness. The comparison between his spirits during that holiday season and the atmosphere of his abstract composition was, he assured Bremmer, entirely apt.

XIX

When Mondrian returned to Laren in January of 1916—it was a Sunday—he hoped to work, with minimal interruption, on his new paintings. He had finished the Beeldemaker copy, and needed only to be paid. Even if he was not leading the life he wanted in Paris, to which he perpetually imagined he might head back, he was in gear.

For a man in his mid-forties, he was in good shape: trim and robust. His main form of exercise was walking—there was no place to dance during the winter where he was, and he had not yet taken up the habit of foxtrotting and waltzing around his studio alone—but he marched at a strong gait when he went into the small village or the surrounding countryside. As always, he saw to his grooming. This was one of his periods of being clean-shaven,

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[1071] H.P. Bremmer, 'Lijnencompositie', in: *Beeldende Kunst* 3(1916)9, p. 106-107, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 109.

[1072] 'dat u wel degelijk gelijk had, toen U zeide dat een ding van me een kerststemming was.' Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, January 5 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19.

with his hair neatly trimmed. He dressed fastidiously and unflamboyantly, his clothing fitting his lanky body impeccably, his looks designed to please and never to startle.

On February 6, Van Doesburg and Lena Milius, his female companion of the moment, went to Laren to meet Mondrian. Until then, Mondrian and Van Doesburg knew each other through their letters. The thirty-three-year-old Theo van Doesburg was a bit of a self-invention, with more of a deliberately artistic persona than Mondrian's. Legally registered as the son of Wilhelm Küpper and Henrietta Catharina Margadant, he had been named Christian Emil Marie Küpper, but he had changed his name out of courtesy to his stepfather, Theodorus Doesburg. He added "van" later, the way Ludwig Mies threw in "van der" when he added his mother's maiden name to soften the sting of Mies. For years Van Doesburg had been a traditional figurative painter, making pictures of dogs in he manner of old-fashioned sporting paintings. In his self-portraits, meanwhile, he made himself diabolical. With a strong jaw and chiseled cheeks, he has eyes that stare threateningly. In one image of himself as an old faun, he appears capable of mischief beyond the perameters of humor; in time, he would live up to his image.

It is no surprise that Van Doesburg should capture his own troublemaking side. He had the instinctive understanding of human foibles that made him both a gifted caricaturist and an effective manipulator of other people. Persuasiveness, sometimes accompanied by mendacity, was his speciality among the human traits he observed in other people and cultivated in himself. In 1910, he had made a series of pencil drawings that successfully parodied the features of two people of great importance to Mondrian, Abraham Kuyper, who had in effect defeated Pieter Mondriaan in their overlapping arena of politics and religion, and Frederik van Eeden, the writer who had publicly lacerated Mondrian artistically and personally. Van Doesburg also did drawings of farmers, burghers, aldermen, and a "Don Juan" endowing them all with the bizarreness of the characters in novels by Gogol. Soon enough, though, this sharp-witted draftsman went off on another artistic tangent, and then another. First he made some atmospheric paintings of dunes—while pleasant, they were not nearly as strong as Mondrian's earlier paintings of the same subject—and from there he shifted, in 1914, to distinctly Cubist work, resembling above all that of Metzinger. The following year, he painted colorful representations of sound, similar in spirit to Kandinsky's efforts in that unusual wish. He also made a portrait of Lena Milius, the woman who accompanied him to meet Mondrian in Laren, that bears a strong resemblance to the portraits Henri

Matisse had painted a decade earlier. Now, in 1916, he was painting compositions that looked like Robert Delaunay's.[1073]

Hermina Frederika Helena Milius, was, at the time she and Van Doesburg arrived in Laren to meet Mondrian, twenty-seven years old. An accountant, she had first encountered Van Doesburg two years earlier just after he had been mobilized into the Dutch army and been encamped near Tilburg, where she lived. She and Van Doesburg had become lovers, although he was married to another woman, Agnita Feis. Van Doesburg declared Milius his muse, saying she had inspired his latest compositions, and his love poems to her had recently been published.[1074]

Walking into To Hannaert's house, Van Doesburg, with a cigarette parked in the corner of his mouth, and Milius, with her wide eyes and cupid lips and black chignon, were a commanding pair.

Mondrian introduced his visitors to the Van Domselaers, Peter Alma, and Schoenmaekers.[1075] The following day, Van Doesburg wrote Antony Kok about the event. Kok, born in 1882, was a telegraph clerk in the railway station in Tilburg but also a pianist and poet, a sympathetic and unusual person grounded in reality while esoteric and spiritual. 'I have the general impression that v. Domselaer and Mondriaan are in the grip of Dr. Schoenmaeker's ideas,' Van Doesburg wrote his friend form his hometown.[1076] That condescending observation was an odd initial assessment given that he would make Mondrian his best friend, but it was in character.

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These people who met in Laren had the usual ins and outs of most bands of idealists. The hero of one month was the devil of the next; strong personalities butted heads; people took sides and then switched them. No wonder Mondrian saw art as the sole means of achieving balance and equilibrium. From the start, Van Doesburg was a troublemaker, and it would not be long before Schoenmaekers joined the ranks of people causing discent.

Schoenmaekers was a mix of genius and Svengali; Van Doesburg someone with more ambition than genius. Van Doesburg misrepresented both Schoenmaekers's ideas, and Mondrian's response to them. 'He regards mathematics as the only purity; the only pure measurement of our emotions.

[1073] See Els Hoek (red.), *Theo van Doesburg: oeuvre catalogue*, Centraal Museum, Utrecht 2000. For instance catalogue number 420 *Portret van Lena Milius*, ca. 1915; 470 *Compositie I (stilleven)*, 1916.

[1074] Hans Renders and Sjoerd van Faassen, 'Agnita Feis: dichter en beeldend kunstenaar zonder oeuvre. Pacifisme voor alles', in: *Zacht Lawijd, Literair-historisch tijdschrift* 16(2017)4, p. 67-92.

[1075] For this first encounter, see also: Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 276-277.

[1076] Letter Van Doesburg to Antony Kok, February 7 1916, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 109.

[…] Mondrian applies this by using the two purest forms, the horizontal and vertical line, in order to express his emotions.'[1077] Those summations of two brilliant men were based on truth, but by oversimplifying, Van Doesburg put himself in a superior position, distorting and mocking ideas damning with faint praise or praising with caveats. In that same letter written the day after their first meeting, Van Doesburg writes, 'Mondriaan is not really the convivial type. He prefers to be alone and does not make new acquaintances willingly.'[1078]

Van Doesburg was not inaccurate in picking up on Mondrian's social awkwardness, but what he failed to recognize was that it was *his* company, not necessarily everyone else's, that Mondrian was resisting. As Maaike Middelkoop pointed out, 'When he was no longer fascinated, he became distant from all that was happening around him, and no longer paid attention. But then he would hear a single word, and make a comment that pertained only to that word—a funny quip irrelevant to the gist of what was being said.'[1079] That lack of social grace, however guileless, made it easy for others to belittle and feel superior to him. But Mondrian knew what he was doing. When he kept his distance, it was not by accident or because he was intrinsically aloof; it was because he chose his moments to engage.

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That March 1916, Mondrian found a slightly larger and better studio he could use in Blaricum, a twenty-minute walk from To Hannaert's house.[1080] From March 11 to April 2, he had four works in the second exhibition of the Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring, at the Stedelijk.[1081] The Netherlands was proving to be a propitious place to wait out the war. With one of his latest compositions, in unprecedentedly strong colors, Mondrian attached the work on top of its wooden frame, exposing the bare sides of the canvas, rather than having the framing strips buttnessed against them, in effect concealing them, or having the painting set inside of the frame in the traditional way, akin to a precious jewel presented within its mount.[1082] That change stripped away a barrier between the viewer and the painting, calling attention to the tactile reality of this abstract creation as a canvas stretched taut on its four wooden stretchers, stapled down to the support it covered, and transformed the painting into a living presence, with the viewer invited boldly and truthfully into the physical process.

[1077] Letter Van Doesburg to Antony Kok, February 7 1916, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 109.
[1078] Letter Van Doesburg to Antony Kok, February 7 1916, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 109.
[1079] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 286.
[1080] Le Coultre, *De hut van Mondriaan*, p. 33-34.
[1081] Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 28-29.
[1082] B80 *Compositie*, 1916, oil on canvas, 119 x 75,1 cm, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

It took confidence to make that breakthrough which he would make a major element of his art from here forward, but he was more desperate about money than ever. On March 17, his friend Steenhoff wrote to ask Bremmer to give the artist an allowance of 50 guilders a month. Steenhoff hoped that with this more regular and dependable arrangement, Mondrian's situation would be stabilized. Hendricus Petrus Bremmer was, yet again, the rare thing. He rapidly agreed to provide Mondrian with the fixed monthly income Steenhoff had suggested. In return, Mondrian was to make him four paintings, each 60x60 cm. There was no urgency about completing them, but Bremmer would have the right to sell them if he wanted.[1083]

In April, shortly after the first installment of cash came in, Mondrian wrote his patron to say that this support was helping him get closer to completing a book about how he positioned himself and his art in the greater scheme of things. He saw his work as 'only a consequence of what has always been done and been attempted,' but revolutionary because it was a byproduct of 'the spirit of a time to come.' He also said that in the book he wrote 'about humanity: because art and humanity are one.'[1084] Mondrian knew he had made different choices from other people, but he did not see himself as heroic. Rather, his approach was consistent both with Theosophy and with the modernist style that was currently at the forefront and that would surely have a strong impact on the future. He had found the means to maintain his calm and equipoise under everyday circumstances that others could have considered harrowing, but he did not consider himself possessed of rare virtue, only as having taken elements of past, present, and future culture vital to staying on a certain course.

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Perhaps because Bremmer had told him he could take his time finishing the art he owed for his stipend, as far as we know Mondrian only completed one significant painting in all of 1916. He was beset by health problems—an excruciating abscess early in the year, Spanish flu later on—and was also completely engrossed in his writing when he was feeling up to it, and used his remaining time and energy to start and revise a series of compositions he would only complete in the following year, a luxury he could afford thanks to his stipend.

The distinguished art critic Hilton Kramer presents, however, a very different interpretation of the nearly complete hiatus in Mondrian's artistic production in 1916. Kramer saw the striking drop in Mondrian's output as the result of a major internal struggle induced by M. H. J. Schoenmaekers.

Kramer writes:

[1083] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 110.

[1084] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, April 2 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 110.

'Schoenmaekers was a Neo-Platonist in quest of a reality more absolute than any that could be discerned in the natural world without the aid of mystical illumination. Nature […[was looked upon as a mystery to be scrutinized and penetrated—a view that was more or less in accord with theosophical doctrine. Truth was defined as the reduction of "the relativity of natural facts to the absolute, in order to recover the absolute in natural facts." What was especially important in this theory was that art, if sufficiently awakened to its mystical role, was accorded a central place in the metaphysical process. "In art," Schoenmaekers wrote, mysticism "creates what we call, in the strictest sense, 'style.'" Style in art is characterized as "the general in spite of the particular" and the means by which "art is integrated in general cultural life." Thus the joint task of the artist and the mystic is "to penetrate nature in such a way that the inner construction of reality is revealed to us."

Schoenmaekers's theories were important for Mondrian in his thinking about abstraction. Schoenmaekers also specified the nature of the forms (rectilinear structures of the horizontal and the vertical) and the colors (the primaries: red, yellow, and blue) to be used in this artistic quest for the absolute, and then elaborated upon their cosmic significance. "This new plastic expression," Schoenmaekers wrote in The New Image of the World, "is of this world. … But it is a new earthiness, an earthly heaven." And an "earthly heaven" … was indeed what the artists of the De Stijl group, Mondrian most conspicuously, were determined to create in abstract art.'[1085]

Schoenmaekers and Mondrian certainly explored these ideas together in their long evenings at the dinner table in Laren, but if Hilton Kramer had ever seen the small sketchbook Mondrian had written in Domburg in 1912, he would have realized that, well before Mondrian met Schoenmaekers or Schoenmaekers published his ideas, Mondrian had come to many of these conclusions himself. I'm convinced that if only Kramer had read the texts in those sketchbooks, he would have realized that Mondrian was not at war with himself in striving for pure abstraction while feeling shackled to the artistic tradition of Uncle Frits and Dutch art, but was already nurturing his ideas when he met Schoenmaekers. Yet Kramer depicts Mondrian as

'daunted by the vision of an art that might jettison all the variations in tone and contour that had remained a staple of his

[1085] Hilton Kramer, 'Mondrian & mysticism: "My long search is over"', in: *The New Criterion* 14(1995)1, p. 4-14.

> painting even when he abandoned conventional representation in the most highly developed of his 'Cubist' abstractions. During this difficult period of transition to a more absolute mode of abstraction, when every mark on the canvas was an exploration of the unknown, Mondrian nonetheless held fast to such vestiges of tradition even as he was inching his way toward a conception of painting that would finally do without them.
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> Clearly it was not an easy matter for a painter of Mondrian's background and experience, even at this relatively advanced stage of his development, to bid an irrevocable farewell to […] fundamental pictorial practice. The depth of the perturbation caused by this radical option may be inferred from the fact that only one painting by the artist survives from the year 1916. This was the crucial period in which Mondrian was struggling to reconcile the demands of his art with the appeal of Schoenmaekers's ideas. The abstraction that he produced that year—*Composition: 1916*, now in the collection of the Guggenheim Museum—is at once a summation of the "old" painting and a partial preview of the new. Its forms are predominantly rectilinear but still soft-edged, 'open,' and irregular. Its black lines hold firmly to right-angled verticals and horizontals, but at the side edges of the painting they shade off into veiled grays. Its colors —blues and blueish grays, pinks and grayish pinks, yellowish ochres that in places turn brown—are cousin to the primaries, but remain equivocal, impure, and atmospheric. There is no discernible subject in *Composition: 1916*, but for anyone who knows the Pier and Ocean drawings by Mondrian that preceded it there is an unmistakable visual echo, or memory, in its fragmented grid structure. This is painting with a pronounced appetite for an absolute it does not yet command the means of realizing.'[1086]

How people differ even with looking at the same art. Mondrian in my eyes had been facing that absolute for a long time—in the *Red Cloud* and his best paintings of woods as well as in his canvases of Brabant farmhouses designed for the processing of manure. There is nothing about him, or his art, that suggests to me the irresolution or paralysis Hilton Kramer finds in it. Rather, the reason for his slowdown in production, to the point of a virtual halt in his abstraction, was less profound. He was enjoying the luxury of a stipend, while at the same time he was often in too much physical discomfort to paint, and when he had the time and wherewithal to stand up and hold a brush, he started a lot without feeling rushed to finish it.

[1086] Hilton Kramer, 'Mondrian & mysticism: "My long search is over"', in: *The New Criterion* 14(1995)1, p. 4-14.

Still, kudos to Hilton Kramer for his trenchant analysis of the 1916 Composition at the Guggenheim. His depiction of it as transitional positions the only painting Mondrian completed in the entire year exactly where it belongs. Lovely, lyrical, *Composition* reveals Mondrian working toward a fantastic goal, about to enter the territory he would inhabit artistically and emotionally for the rest of his life, yet not quite there.

XX

In April of 1916, the artist Bart van der Leck moved to Laren. He and Mondrian became happy allies. They played a lot of billiards, and enjoyed one another's artistic influence. Mondrian considered that he was making a significant advance thanks to Van der Leck's 'unified plans and pure colors. My technique, more or less cubist, still more or less pictorial, responded to the influence of his exact technique.'[1087] Even if the impact of Schoenmaekers on Mondrian was as profound as Hilton Kramer depicts it, in Laren Mondrian was surrounded by a small supportive contingent of friendly critics, collectors, and fellow artists that spring, and far from the morose state in which Hilton Kramer depicts him.

And even if he did not complete a lot of work, Mondrian made yet another fantastic leap in his painting. For he now began *Composition in Line.*[1088] On July 15, 1916, thinking he had arrived at a point when he was ready to photograph it, he would write Bremmer, that he was trying to achieve 'the greatest possible general expression […] of the natural in the deepest possible manifestation.'[1089] The man who only four years earlier had painted the overloaded, garish *Evolution,* was developing a new form of beauty that was as ethereal, lithe, graceful, and timeless as great music, and universal in its radiant spirituality.

When someone as perceptive as Hilton Kramer takes a stance, to disregard it would be foolish, we cannot cast his notion of an emotional paralysis aside. Kramer may have been right that the situation with Schoenmaekers was getting inside Mondrian. But even if Mondrian produced next to nothing for a whole year—what could be perceived as a creative block—he was feeling greatly encouraged. In June, Helene Kröller-Müller bought another early *Composition N° XI*, from Walrecht, for 100 guilders, the equivalent of $1100 today.[1090] Mondrian had become even

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[1087] Mondrian reminisced about it in the *dernier numéro* of *De Stijl*, 1932, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 110.
[1088] B82 *Composition in Line*, 1916 (First state).
[1089] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, July 15 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 255.
[1090] B31 *Composition No.XI*, 1913, oil on canvas, 76 x 57,5 cm, Kröller-Müller Museun.

closer to Van der Leck, writing Bremmer how happy he was to have a fellow artist 'striving in the same directions.'[1091]

Whatever sufferings Mondrian had they were more of the everyday variety—concerning health and money—than the anguish with which Kramer describes him. Money remained tight; regardless of the stipend and sale, he was forced to make two more portrait copies for 500 guilders. He had a 'raging pain' from a debilating abscess that was the result of problems with a crown he had made in Paris.[1092]

Mondrian's greatest concern that May, it seems, was that on June 10 the Hamdorff would open for the season. He was determined to have the right clothes.[1093] He wrote Slijper one letter after another about suits and jackets. He considered going to Slijper's tailor. The cost was prohibitive though. Instead, he wore an old suit of Slijper's: not a gift, but part of an exchange of art for his clients's discarded clothing.

In that detail, you learn everything about Mondrian's financial straits and his relationship with his closest patron. Later that year, Mondrian would exchange a self-portrait for yet another suit. He and Slijper also swapped jackets, writing back and forth about the prices, with Mondrian having to pay Slijper fifty guilders—his monthly allowance from Bremmer—as part of the deal.

Yet nothing was black and white. On one occasion, Slijper gave Mondrian a jacket. Mondrian liked it immensely, so much so that he wondered if Slijper also had a vest that went with it.[1094] We do not know the upshot, but shortly thereafter, Slijper lent him evening clothes—free of charge—so he had the requisite attire for a dinner in the course of an artists' conference.

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In one letter to Slijper, Mondrian wrote that he was not going that evening because he had to shave for the following day.[1095] Was there ever another man who was as fastidious? How could shaving occupy an evening and prevent one from leaving the house? And who shaves the night before?

The idea that Mondrian took so much time to shave suggests that it was not only on the occasions about which we are certain—that he shaved half of his face at a time, making a perfect vertical subdivision in the middle of his chin and above his mouth. If one shaves this way, it requires a lot more time, of course. One lathers and brushes twice; one has to work carefully to

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[1091] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, August 1 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19.
[1092] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, Laren Sunday April 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr 159.
[1093] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, May 24 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 149.
[1094] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 171.
[1095] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, Wednsday evening 1916, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 164.

achieve the vertical line. This was even more the case in the days of straight razors, prior to the safety ones of today.

In Mondrian's case, because his beard was black, the smooth skin was in marked contrast to the skin still covered in beard. Knowing how much he cared about light versus dark, and the importance he ascribed to the vertical as being emblematic of maleness, with facial hair of his sort also a mark of maleness, his shaving in this manner turned his face into a sort of art work. It was certainly a way of imposing an unusual degree of order on nature. And in effect of presenting a more masculine and, in essence, his feminine side simultaneously.

It also was a statement about time in the larger sense. The smoothness of shaved skin gives the impression of a pre-pubescent, babyish state; a bearded face is the mark of mature manhood. In the short term, there is the time it takes for a beard to grow, which varies from individual to individual, and, more briefly, the time it takes to shave. By shaving part way, one stops the clock—whether we are considering the flow of time in increments of minutes, or years.

XXI

I believe that the reason above all others that Mondrian was not more productive in 1916 was that he was working continuously on *Composition in Line* without being able to satisfy himself that he had achieved his goal. The painting is a large square canvas—108 x 108 centimeters. His ambition for the roughly circular composition he created within the perfect rigid form was a lively irregularity. As precisely as he calculated and refined the lines, he could not get it right. The simple elements in their intermeshed totality needed to have a pulse, to move inwards and outwards. Finally, Mondrian did not achieve his ambitions sufficiently to consider the painting completed. The result of that stretched work in the course of over a year exists today only in photographs, because he completely revised the painting in the course of the following year, 1917.

In *Composition in Line (first state)*, Mondrian took a lot of what he had done in *Composition in Black and White* a step further. He eradicated the distinction between the one background tone behind the design scheme and a different hue surrounding it. Now he kept the surface consistent. The presence of the flurry of short horizontals and verticals, opposition to their absence, creates the illusion of two different tones, however. The bits and pieces of space visible behind the lines appears darker than the empty space surrounding them, but this is optical, not factual.

While moving from studio to studio and shuttling between Laren and Amsterdam because of his obligation to take commissions, Mondrian refined and altered the abstraction time and again. On May 3, 1916, Mondrian wrote Sal Slijper that when he was finished redoing it he would

show it to him, but he allowed that Slijper might want to wait until he had made further progress; he wanted Slijper only to buy 'something which is completely to your liking.'[1096] Mondrian was deluding himself. He would never finish redoing the work, and Slijper was unlikely to purchase anything so abstract in any case. Yet Mondrian was already discussing price. He alerted his collector that this large new work would cost at least two hundred guilders—added reason for the buyer to be 'completely happy with it.'[1097] He had a better chance of completing a negotiation with Slijper about a suit or jacket. This was a maneuver; Mondrian knew Slijper's preference for the early work, and was simply trying to bait him.

Four days later, Mondrian wrote a very similar letter to Van Assendelft.[1098] With the pastor who collected abstract art and who had bought a Kandinsky as well as Mondrian's own non-representational work, he had a far better chance of a sale than with Slijper. Mondrian's routine practice of letting collectors know what he was currently working on in order to interest them in advance had a chance of laying the groundwork for an actual purchase. With what he considered his most important work to date, he worked hard on the pre-sale, notifying Bremmer as well. He wanted all the possible purchasers on alert.

In mid-July, Mondrian informed Bremmer that he had finally achieved what he wanted with the canvas, or, at least, come closer. He wrote the critic/art advisor that he was sending him two photographs of it; he was pleased, because it was 'more advanced, more universal in its expression' than anything to date.[1099] As usual, Mondrian denigrated his own earlier work. He now felt that his Church façades of the previous year suffered from 'a certain "loftiness"'—but he was happy because he was now approaching 'in my humble opinion […] The greatest possible expression of the natural in the deepest possible manifestation.'[1100]

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He may well have sent the same images to Van Assendelft, similarly to foster interest. Mondrian sent a photo of the work to Van Doesburg as well, although there the reason was probably just to provide an update, not to grease the wheels of a sale. That single photo to the fellow artist Mondrian expected to understand his purpose is why we even have a record of the remarkable painting he eventually buried for all times underneath a new

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[1096] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, May 3 1916, RKD # 0150 inv.nr. 147. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 255.
[1097] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, May 3 1916, RKD # 0150 inv.nr. 147. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 255.
[1098] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, May 7 1916, in: Joosten, *Documentatie over Mondriaan (4)*, p. 219.
[1099] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, July 15 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 255.
[1100] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, July 15 1916, RKD #0613 inv.nr 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 255.

construction. He used a little cross on the back of the photo to show which side was the top, because otherwise it would not be apparent.[1101] But still, even if Mondrian was briefly content with the composition and considered it finished, on August 1, he wrote Bremmer allowing that because he had the commission to do those two portraits for five hundred guilders, he was free to work in the way he wanted, which meant he could make further refinements to *Composition in Line* before being obliged to sell it as it was. The portrait income gained him essential time. In search of perfection, Mondrian cared only about that freedom; to labor over copies was a price he was willing to pay for the liberty to push his new work further without having to sell it.

When Mondrian completely overpainted *Composition in Line* the following year, obliterating the work that had preoccupied him for most of 1916, he voiced no sadness or grief. What mattered was the quality of what he achieved, not the energies he had deployed. Time spent was knowledge gained. At least he knew better than to foist on the world something inferior. He planned to do better.

XXII

One evening toward the end of the summer of 1916, Maaike Middelkoop and Jakob van Domselaer and Mondrian went to the Schoenmaekers' house, a short walk away through the village of Laren. Each one of them was carrying two canvases by Mondrian.

Once they went into the house of the philosopher/mathematician with whom they spent so many long evenings, Mondrian put each painting, one at a time, on a chair. Saying nothing, he studied his own work intensely, as if scrutinizing every detail.

Schoenmaekers simply glanced at the canvases in front of him before coming to a snap judgment. These were paintings from the previous year and unfinished new ones. Schoenmaekers began to explicate the theory represented. The more Schoenmaekers talked, the more Mondrian 'withdrew completely.' As usual, he held his head at a slight angle, slightly cocked to the side. Schoenmaekers went on and on about Theosophy, Blavatsky, and Steiner, criticizing them vociferously, while Mondrian said nothing.

Suddenly, Mondrian shook his head. 'No fellow, now you're wrong. Those big guys really knew things.'[1102]

[1101] 'Hierbij een foto van mijn laatste ding in zwart en wit. Het kruisje achterop geeft aan dat dat de bovenkant is.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, July 21, 1916, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

[1102] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 279.

Schoenmaekers was unused to such contradiction. Middelkoop and Van Domselaer waited for an explosion.

But Mondrian had them leave before the startled Schoenmaekers had a chance to answer. As the three walked back, the paintings again under their arms, Mondrian was perfectly relaxed. 'He does not understand totally, but at least with him it is about theory, while I was really annoyed by his wife,' Mondrian told his friends.[1103] He quoted some trivial remark of Mrs. Schoenmaekers, an example of her pettiness, getting his young friends to laugh as they continued homeward cheerful and relaxed.

Mondrian had found Mrs. Schoenmaekers' irrelevant observations intolerable while Schoenmaekers's attacks on his favorite thinkers bothered him less because at least Schoenmaekers engaged in the issues that mattered. Mondrian was 'deadly serious – every step that he made was an absolute necessity for him […] an inner demand. It was a deeper matter than the painting that resulted; he was after something far beyond the object. He lived to engage in the creative process. Once Jakob asked him what he would do if he became unable to confront a white canvas. "When I have told what I have to tell, I quit. Then I go to the south, to pick olives for instance.'"[1104] He did not mind living in poverty, or being disregarded by the larger public, and at least he felt supported by Van Doesburg and other friends.

While Van Domselaer credited Mondrian with having a great impact on his music, Mondrian favored the precision of the horizontal and the vertical, while the composer said he had to work without abstract ratios. The younger man, his fiancée at his side, made the remark one might when the couple was seated on the side of the dining room table facing Mondrian on the other side. 'Then our ways separate here,' Mondrian declared.[1105]

But the main reason the three stopped living together is that in October, Jakob van Domselaer and Maaike Middelkoop married and moved to Amsterdam. This meant that Mondrian had to find a new place to live; the boarding house where he and they lived was not available to him unless they were part of the package, and Catharina Hannaert could not give him a room that winter. Mondrian rented first one room, then another. Whatever was cheap and handy sufficed. In a house belonging to a teacher who taught at the Humanitarian School in Laren, where Mondrian was able to get a reasonable deal, he took first one room and then another and was happy to stay because he met the Belgian artist Nico Eekman, who had fled to the Netherlands for safety and gave him French lessons.[1106] This allowed him at least to imagine his return to Paris with a new confidence.

[1103] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 279.
[1104] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 279-280.
[1105] Van Domselaer-Middelkoop, *Herinneringen*, p. 281.
[1106] Le Coultre, *De hut van Mondriaan*, p. 34. Cf. Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 212-214.

Schoenmaekers, meanwhile, now destroyed what hope there was for their relationship.

Mondrian had given the philosopher the manuscript in which he was putting down his new ideas. He rarely entrusted his writing to anyone else, but Schoenmaekers could not be bothered to read it. Mondrian began to refer to Schoenmaekers as a "bad guy" and "that headmaster pope."[1107]

#

By he start of 1917, it was clear that America would enter the world war. To many people, it seemed that a solution to the turmoil in Europe was at last in sight. For now, however, Germany rallied to defend itself, and the sense of danger only intensified.

In the winter of 1916-1917, Mondrian's situation had become tougher still, as he was incapacitated by poor health. In the past year he had been felled by a series of colds and flus; this time it was intestinal problems that had him miserable in his modest room in Laren. As usual, he took it all matter-of-factly, without complaint. Mondrian simply sought the most efficient solution that would enable him to get back to the easel. His decision was a unusual as everything else about him: a diet consisting of nothing but apples and buttermilk. He stuck to it rigorously until his stomach pain subsided and his digestion returned to normal.[1108]

He had no problem with strict regimes as long as they were effective, or he considered them effective. For the rest of his life, Mondrian would periodically put himself on one or another special diet. They were all based on a limited number of reduced elements, eaten in strictly measured quantities. Constitutionally delicate, in some eyes hypochondriacal, he always sought the latest solution. His ailments were real, after all, and he was always willing to take the next step, ignoring discomfort as best he could, remaining emotionally hearty with his mix of reality about doing the best for himself and denial of his suffering.

XXIII

As world war further engulfed much of Europe, most people could think of little else beyond the question of human survival itself, Mondrian addressed that issue with his own particular slant in a lecture he gave at the Theosophical Lodge in Laren.[1109] Standing before his audience, he offered

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[1107] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 202. 'Zoo zou Schoenmakers van nut kunnen zijn, als hij niet zoo'n beroerde vent was – ik geloof echter ook niet, dat het echt bij hem is.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 21 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

[1108] Letter Mondrian to Sal Slijper, Laren Wednesday night [c. late 1916, early 1917], RKD #0150 inv.nr. 162.

[1109] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111. Cf. Van Paaschen, *Mondriaan en Steiner*, p. 110.

his personal solution to the current turmoil. The tall, lean, neatly dressed forty-four-year-old artist read the introduction to his new book out loud, looking down at the page through the black-rimmed eyeglasses that gave him a slightly owlish look, because he believed that the text on which he had labored tirelessly day after day, perpetually revising the words and punctuation, was the best way he could articulate his theory that the right art could replace everyday reality with something purer. He spoke with absolute certitude, and each time he voiced his faith in art freed from all representation, whether of seen reality or emotional narrative, he invoked his ideal of a heightened spiritual state with equal enthusiasm and palpable victoriousness. His audience was not enthusiastic, however. Whether the problem was his ideas or his delivery, the complex language in which he basically repeated the same ideas time and again, was a poor tool. His cumbersome manner of stating and restating the points he hoped to drive home did not sway his listeners.

Mondrian was matter-of-fact about the negative response. He did not analyse the reasons he failed to inspire enthusiasm, and found specious reasons for his failure; rather than recognizing the problem of his delivery, and of his indifference to his listeners' needs, he believed that the only problem was human reluctance. After the public address, he wrote Van Assendelft, 'I stood firm, but I was under the distinct impression that these folks were not quite ready for "absoluteness".'[1110]

Mondrian had no doubt that the artistic purity he was pursuing would benefit the masses even if they did not realize it. He wrote Van Assendelft that he was 'completely convinced' his ideas had a 'justness,' and that 'those people'—the audience in Laren—would eventually recognize their wisdom even if they were not yet able to respond a hundred per cent. It was the same way he responded when his piece was rejected by the Theosophical Society. Mondrian never considered that his text or his presentation might be the problem; the only issue was public readiness.

Still, he was determined to increase his effectiveness by sharpening his language. Mondrian tried to improve verbal articulation with the same frenzied ardor that he chronically repainted the short straight lines on his latest canvas. He revised the introduction to his book, going to the same pains in choosing his words as in determining the thickness of boundaries or the exact tone of the white paint. He sent his revised introduction to Van Assendelft asking 'if it was any better.'[1111]

In the measurements within his paintings, Mondrian was always his own judge; with his writing, he readily turned to others. He had also begun to

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[1110] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, [postmarked January 26] 1917, quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111.

[1111] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, [postmarked January 26] 1917, quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111.

consult with Van der Leck on the text that followed the introduction. Whatever Mondrian did in life, he was determined to do as well as possible.

#

The regular stipend from Bremmer was not enough to keep Mondrian afloat. By January of 1917, he was down to the wire financially. He again had to take on portrait commissions, leaving little time for his own work. He would have preferred to be revising his new abstractions and his book text, but he doubted he would get his own work ready for a show scheduled to open on March 10 and questioned if the exhibition would be able to take place.[1112] Besides, if his hands were too cold, he could not paint. There was not a spare piece of coal in Amsterdam, and the Stedelijk had been forced to close for the winter months—with no guarantee it would reopen because it could not keep its rooms heated.

Mondrian wrote Van Assendelft about the situation providing the sort of newsletter of his personal ups and downs he habitually gave his supporters. He let Van Assendelft know that Peter Alma had recently told him that an 'oval work' by him looked good at the Rijksmuseum. He had not gone to see it there, but he was pleased. 'Good to hear that the older work still holds its own. Although I prefer my recent works, appreciation for the older ones still gratifies. The other day I even came across a thing from my naturalistic period which gave me pleasure.'[1113]

Probably correct in thinking that the vicar was so devoted to him that he would want to hear every last detail of his self-evaluation and of his humors as well as his financial situation, Mondrian continued the litany. Because he had to send his rent to Paris, he had to ask his client, Mr. Van Aalst, for an advance, although it would still be a couple of more weeks before he could deliver his portraits. The monthly payment from Bremmer helped, he allowed, but he did not have enough money, making him conclude, 'So I will have to improvise, as I'd rather not ask for another advance, and Bremmer's money isn't enough at the moment. So you know where you can put it, if you happen to have some extra. But that won't be for a while, I suppose, because you sent some recently. In any case - now you know.'[1114]

At least the cold weather was apparently over. Reporting that, Mondrian made a rare acknowledgement of the war. He wished that it, too, was ending. He was continuing with his French lessons and hoped to be back in Paris by the autumn.

This was one wish Van Assendelft could not possibly fulfill for him. But the heroic pastor took up on Mondrian's disingenuous hint and sent money.

[1112] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, January 16 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19.

[1113] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 19 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 3.

[1114] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 19 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 3.

Mondrian quickly acknowledged this 'great service,' as if the funds were for a shared cause beyond the individuals undertaking it.[1115]

XXIV

Some of you may think that I am reading too much significance into a discovery I made in one of the letters to Van Assendelft. But I am confident that most of you will agree with me that Mondrian's revelation to the vicar gives us rare insight into our elusive subject.

On February 22, 1917, Mondrian, in his rented room in Laren, wrote about his own battles in that dire moment of the first world war. After thanking Van Assendelft both for sending important material and for his 'participation'—meaning the vicar's defense of Mondrian's recent work as well as his help with Mondrian's finances—he writes of his way of dealing with his ongoing struggles. In lieu of the usual details concerning shipments and prices that constitute most of his letters to other people, he becomes, in a way rare for Mondrian, quite self-analytical.

Mondrian writes Van Assendelft, with whom he felt an atypical ease, 'Be assured that I will go ahead regardless, with resignation as to "the long run"- it is also a war, less elementary, but still a matter of strenuous perseverance, to do what <u>has</u> to be done.'[1116]

Mondrian's very next sentence leads us to unprecedented understanding of the workings of his mind. Having just mentioned his own 'war' and underlined the word 'has' to emphasize the necessity of his efforts, he tells Van Assendelft, 'I am now reading a wonderful book by a young French painter who became a soldier and wrote letters to his mother, with an interesting foreword by a certain André Chevrillon.'[1117] He explains to the vicar that the book was simply called *Letters from a Soldier*, because at the moment no one knew whether the man was dead or alive, only that he was missing. Since Mondrian never refers elsewhere in any of his known letters to books, and in general we do not get to know him as much of a reader, his discussing one with such enthusiasm was exceptional. He was certain Van Assendelft would love the volume as well, and urged him to buy it. 'I'm eager to hear whether you like it as much as I do,' he adds with his usual politeness.[1118]

[1115] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

[1116] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

[1117] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

[1118] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

In his entire life, Mondrian almost never reacted as strongly to something from the outside—a work of music, other books, an artistic masterpiece. Why did this book had such an impact on him?

He explained to Van Assendelft that he was going through *Letters from a Soldier* incrementally but regularly 'because I'm still going ahead with the book: another slow attack!'[1119] Mondrian compared himself to the anonymous soldier on the battlefield. Putting his artistic theories into words—*his* 'slow attack'—he did not think about how hard it was; he just did it. Also like the soldier, he remained guardedly optimistic. Mondrian likened his endurance as a painter to the stoic way the soldier coped with war. An exhibition the next month at the Stedelijk, with his work featured in it, would probably be cancelled because of lack of coal to keep the gallery warm; Mondrian was determined not just to endure the disappointment, but to face it positively: 'It's all right the way things are. We can't do more than we are capable of doing.'[1120]

Mondrian could open up with Van Assendelft as with no one else. Having grown up surrounded by preachers who expected fealty to their reactionary views, he relished the chance to address a man of the cloth who gave rather than imposed, and who was progressive and brave enough to endorse his own work as well as that of Kandinsky.

Mondrian allowed to the vicar that the unknown soldier was the model for his own comportment. The youth on the battlefield embodied the traits Mondrian deems essential in life. Calm rather than self-pitying, resolved about how to proceed through the various difficulties he encountered, neither grandiose nor overly modest but possessed of a sensible perspective on his relative significance in the world, he was quietly heroic. The way the soldier coped with difficulty, in tandem with the depth with which he felt the wonder of life, was Mondrian' elixir.

#

Mondrian was not yet completely bi-lingual, but the language of *Lettres d'un soldat*, which had been published in France at the end of the previous year, was succinct enough for him to read it without problems. All that he knew about its author was that he was a young French painter who had been at the front from the start of August, 1914—just a few days after Mondrian left Paris and found himself cut off in the Netherlands because of the start of war. Following nine months of writing frequently to his mother and grandmother, the soldier had, to date, never been heard from again. In his introduction to the volume, André Chevrillon, a writer who was a friend of the soldier's family, said there was a chance that the soldier might still be a prisoner of war in Germany. The soldier's mother felt that to give his name

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[1119] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

[1120] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4.

would be to abandon her last hope that he remained alive; this would still be true in June of 1917, when an American, Theodore Stanton, translated and published the book in English.

In the first months of the war, the soldier—who *we* now know to have been Eugène-Emmanuel Lemercier, twenty-eight years old when he entered the war, even though Mondrian never knew the name or age—demonstrated a resolve, an appreciation of earthy life, and a focus on the absolute that spoke deeply to Mondrian. On August 16, 1914, writing the two women who had raised him, Lemercier informs them, 'We are still without any news, just as you are; but fortunately we are blessed with a lot of patience. I have found some pleasure in feasting my eyes on the landscape hereabouts, notwithstanding the invasion of red trousers and blue coats. We are sending many of them forward and they all accept their part tranquilly.'[1121]

Even if he had not faced enemy troops or lived in the trenches, Mondrian had experienced that same lack of information about his fate. Simultaneously, he, too, had been possessed of the ability to focus on the beauty of the landscape during that summer of such uncertainty, and to be buoyed by red and blue. Reading Lemercier, relating his own plight to the soldier's, Mondrian wished he had even more of the same forbearance.

As the war between Germany and France escalated, Lemercier demonstrated to an even greater degree the stoicism that Mondrian was making his own. Lemercier's attitude became his model for dealing with his own dislocation and his daily financial problems matter-of-factly and without complaint. The young man whose name Mondrian did not even know touched him to the core in writing his mother and grandmother that he wanted them to realize 'how edifying and how precious these trials have been to me. Our suffering should be considered in every instance a most wonderful source of emotions and formation of conscience. I know not whither destiny leads me, but it is not—this I am sure of—toward the haughty and artificial regions of pure speculations.' Rather, the soldier was determined to fulfill his obligations, 'and into this work I must carry a spirit awake to every sensation.' He posited to the two women who had raised him that 'if I ever get back alive' he would still manage to value life 'in case I am wounded in such a way as never to be able to paint again.'[1122]

The courage in the face of hardship and uncertainty, the appreciation of what is fortifying to look at, and the development of one's inner power, constituted Mondrian's ideal. Two weeks later, Lemercier writes his mother, 'The essential thing now is to appreciate fully the present moment and to get out of it all the good and beautiful and edifying that are in it. Anyway,

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[1121] Eugène Emmanuel Lemercier, *A Soldier of France to his Mother: Letters from the Trenches on the Western Front*, A.C. McClurg & Co., Chicago 1917, p. 2.
[1122] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 17.

we cannot tell what the future has in store for us, and it would be a useless and vain torture for us to live always asking what is coming. Do you not find that life has showed on us many pleasures and that one of the latest and greatest is our being able at last to communicate with one another and feel how united we are?'[1123]

That embrace of life without fear or fretting, and the new abstract art as a means of communicating it, were Mondrian's raison d'être.

And then the young man on the battlefield stated Mondrian's own faith and desires more clearly than did any of the people he actually knew, even as Mondrian realized the writer of this trenchant encapsulation of his own beliefs was most probably dead by now:

'Dear Mother, less than ever should we despair, for never before have we been so convinced that all these agitations and human deliriums are as nothing in comparison with the eternal spark which each of us bears in his breast, and that all these monstrosities will end in a better future. … Have you not remarked that in the midst of all this destruction not a particle of the soul I lost and the belief in the existence of a superior law has never been lessened an iota?'[1124]

Mondrian had found his perfect soulmate in this anonymous soldier believing so strongly in a 'superior law.' To see the eternal and prize it above all that is particular and individual—and to rejoice rather than, for a moment, feel victimized—was the only way to live.

Mondrian noted that the longer the soldier was on the battlefield or at nearby campsites, the more resolved he became. At the end of October, Lemercier assures his mother and grandmother, 'Happy he who can hear the note of peace, as in a pastoral symphony, but thrice happy he who has a presentiment of it while still in the midst of the tumult.'[1125]

What impressed Mondrian was not only the optimism, but the soldier's ability to sustain himself through the sights he took in with his painter's eye, whatever the vicissitudes of his life. The sunlight on November 6 was so exceptional that, just after acknowledging his and his mates' anguish as the escalating war kept them cut off from home and family, he writes the two women, 'Today we are blest with a Corot landscape with its delicate and intimate touch.'[1126] The following day, he amplifies on the beauty of the previous afternoon: 'The atmosphere was delicate and refined, and every object was outlined in a misty veil. The little wood near our guardhouse has been taken possession of by a flock of green birds with white-bordered wings, the males having black head with a white spot.'[1127]

[1123] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 19.
[1124] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 19-20.
[1125] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 27.
[1126] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 36.
[1127] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 37-38.

With that susceptibility to the force of color, and the only suggestion of a complaint the soldier makes — 'You cannot imagine my longing to be in a position where I can paint all we feel'[1128]— Mondrian felt a rare camaderie.

#

It is unfortunate that Mondrian did not know Lemercier's actual story, which only came out many years later, because he would have been fascinated. When Lemercier was seven months old, his father died, leaving his mother and maternal grandmother to bring him up. He was a fragile, unhealthy child, saved mainly by a natural artistic ability that became apparent when the two women taught him to draw. They lived in Paris, where his mother introduced him to a professor at the École des Beaux Arts, who recognized his talent and admitted him at age fifteen. When he was nineteen years old, he had a portrait accepted in the annual Salon des Artistes Français in the Grand Palais, but his success as an artist did not prevent him from joining the 106th Regiment. A year later, in 1906, he returned to his artistic studies, and quickly advanced his reputation with a painting called *Contemplation*.

The large canvas was specifically intended to demonstrate the idea that all human effort is directed toward the contemplation of eternal matters. Lemercier illustrated that search with a group of people of different ages, clearly from varying backgrounds, surrounding a central character looking into the sky. Lemercier had started a second painting on the same theme when illness forced him to leave Paris for a sanitarium in Switzerland; from there he rejoined his regiment in order to fight the Germans.

Even without the information that Lemercier was a gifted painter who repeatedly battled against difficulty, Mondrian fastened onto the soldier/writer's ability to recognize profound qualities, normally associated with human behavior, in visual events. Lemercier describes the 'grace and goodness' in the sky following a rain storm, and observes on one occasion that 'the landscape […] was softened down under the splendor of the clouds.'[1129] What one takes in though the eyes brings balm to his soul as nothing else can: 'The green of the ivy, the red tinge of autumn, the decided touch of winter in the branches—an instant of such a scene is generally a whole life to me.'[1130] When Lemercier writes his mother and grandmother, that, by comparison, 'every human expectation is a poor, empty dream,' he is espousing Mondrian's same hierarchy of values.

The unnamed soldier's consciousness of the eternal corresponds to the central issue of the essay Mondrian was working on night after night. On Christmas morning of 1914, he is struck by the triumph of 'beauty' and the 'conscience' of humanity in spite of what he calls the 'present bloody

[1128] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 38.
[1129] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 85.
[1130] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 85-86.

infatuation.'[1131] He describes line of soldiers in front of and behind the entrenchments singing both 'the enemy's Christmas hymn' and the Marseillaise. 'It was the eternal aspiration after harmony, and indomitable demand for the beauty and concord of order.'[1132] Mondrian's soul mate then writes, astonishingly: 'My last art work before the war was pure thought, wholly intellectual; and my chief ambition, perfectly natural under the circumstances, was simply to give plastic form to this thought as it developed.'[1133]

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By February of 1915, however, the soldier can no longer conceal his anguish. Deeply fatigued, 'in a sort of a fit of the dumps,' he feels that 'nothingness seems to be the chief end of everything.'[1134] Yet, he still observes 'the plenitude of the universe.' Even though the situation is atrocious, and he has lost his faith in most of his fellow human beings, for three consecutive occasions of being on night duty he observes the moonlight. Transported by the 'purity and whiteness' with 'reddish and blue tints […] spread over the scene,' he makes the breathtaking utterance, 'There are not moments here of such beauty that he who grasps them feels he cannot die.'[1135] Looking at a sunrise over the snow, he adds, 'Here was beauty in spite of all our wickedness.'[1136]

Conditions worsen. The men are obliged to serve five nights in a row in the trenches, with their only sleep being light naps at best. Lemercier is at 'the point of giving way.'[1137] Nonetheless, when beautiful weather arrives with the spring time, he feels the 'secret powers' of nature as never before, and writes, 'I have often experienced the joy of the advent of spring or some other season, but never before I lived every instant of it as I do now. How one thus acquires, without the aid of any instruction, a vague but unquestionable intuition of the absolute […] The quivering of the senses suffice to tell us of the immutable order which rules all evolution.'[1138]

A few days later, he adds 'Now I feel what life really is—the instrument which clears the way for the soul to attain the absolute.'[1139]

That grasp of 'the absolute,' and of 'the immutable order' underlying all life before and after our own, was Mondrian's objective. And in the soldier's ability to wrest beauty out of existence, even under the most tragic circumstances, Mondrian found the exemplar of his deepest beliefs. Lemercier writes his mother that, feverish and 'weak in body and mind,' he

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[1131] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 98.
[1132] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 98.
[1133] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 101.
[1134] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 123.
[1135] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 124.
[1136] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 124.
[1137] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 130.
[1138] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 131.
[1139] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 137.

probably has typhoid, yet he assures her that the sound of the current rushing over pebbles in springs on the Meuse, and the different melody with which it splashes down a cascade, as well as the 'dreamy light' on a hillside, move him immeasurably. Beyond the typhoid, because of his 'dreadful lumbago,' he is unable to eat and sleep. His goal, in spite of his crippling exhaustion, is 'ever to feel in me the inspiration which bears me towards the spiritual riches in life'—even when his 'soul is heavy as lead.'[1140]

Letters from a Soldier ends with a letter written at noon on April, 1915. '*Dear well-beloved Mother*: Here at noon at the extreme point of the attack. I send thee my whole love. Whatever happens, life has had beauty for me.'[1141]

When Mondrian put the volume down, he had found the perfect expression—a consuming intoxication with the beauty of what is eternal as well as a model of the stoicism that love makes possible in spite of unsurmountable obstacles.

XXV

The world war was refusing to end. When the first American troops arrived on the beaches of Normandy, the Germans began to bomb Paris regularly. Whether this was a notion of sound military strategy or a hysterical act of retaliation, the citizens of the French capital regularly had their nights disrupted by sirens summoning them to rush into the makeshift shelters that had been created in cellars all over the city. The few who refused to seek cover—Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, the future Le Corbusier, a recent arrival from Switzerland, was among them—watched enemy aircraft strafe the city, exploding key buildings and bridges.

#

The most significant event in Mondrian's life, meanwhile, is that Salomon Bernard Slijper moved to Blaricum. As the son of a highly successful diamond broker, Slijper was in a strong position to buy art, and now that he was living full time near Mondrian, he planned to go further. He had initially gone to Laren to stay at Catharina Hannaert's in order to chase the divorced ladies who Miss Hannaert's usual residents, but now he was even more interested in acquiring art than in divorcées.

Slijper's father was so successful as a diamond broker that he brought up his children in a lavish house in Amsterdam, while never allowing his wealth to distract him from his piety. When one of his daughters was born on the Sabbath, neither he nor any of the other witnesses signed the birth certificate, such an act being forbidden on the day of rest. Salomon went to a state business school—in keeping with the family's politics, partial to the labor movement and ruling out private learning institutions—and learning

[1140] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 149-150.
[1141] Lemercier, *Letters*, p. 169.

bookkeeping and accounting, which would later be useful in some of the ways he enabled Mondrian to survive.[1142]

When Slijper's father died in 1903, he inherited 8500 guilders. He was working for a bank, his career advancing, but by 1906 had become so restless that he gave up the position. For a while, he enjoyed the life of a rich young man—although, with his soft multiple chins, elongated nose, and low rounded shoulders, was by no standards a handsome one. He spent most of the year in Amsterdam, but for his summer holidays liked the bucolic charms of Laren.

When Slijper stayed in Catharina Hannaert's pension in 1915, he was among the paying guests whose arrival there meant that Mondrian had to move out. But Slijper became aware of Mondrian's existence because of a 1914 composition hanging on the dining room wall, a gift from the artist to thank his host for her hospitability. Slijper later recalled that he did not imagine that an image which was relatively so abstract, at least compared to the art of George Hendrik Breitner and Isaac Israëls which were Slijper's usual taste, if not to Mondrian's subsequent work, would ever move him. Eventually, he changed his mind.[1143]

Slijper had begun to buy Mondrian's work that fall. While staying at a sanatorium, he bought five paintings being stored by Anna Bruin in The Hague, paying 550 guilders for the group, frames included. By the end of 1916, he was a devoted collector. He bought *Evolution*, and in that difficult period during the war when cash was tight for most people, Mondrian would often refer Slijper to collectors whose finances allowed them to buy work, and Slijper functioned as an intermediary.[1144]

In 1917 Slijper bought a farmhouse in Blaricum, and registered as being without profession. He was, however, what we now call "in property"—buying, selling and leasing it. He also treated his art collection almost as a business venture, in which he was assisted by Johanna Hamdorff, niece of the owner of the dancing hall and his live-in housekeeper. And he shared Mondrian's taste for dancing there. They were an unlikely pair for friends—the short, squat orthodox Jewish son of a diamond merchant and the tall lean artist brought up by his father's fire and brimstone Calvinism, but they had in common a will to break free of the strictures of their upbringings and to enjoy life with pleasures denied by their parents. They loved to dance with pretty women, sport fine clothes, listen to jazz, and play billiards—while when they were not diverting themselves, aiming a cue or whirling a lady around the dance floor, they engaged in serious intellectual debate with Peter Alma, Schoenmaekers, and Jakob van Domselaer and Maaike Middelkoop. Sunday afternoons became a sort of salon in Slijper's

[1142] Prins, *Slijper*, p. 145.
[1143] Prins, *Slijper*, p. 148.
[1144] Prins, *Slijper*, p. 150.

farmhouse, with discussions about Freemasonry and Theosophy rambling on into the evenings.[1145]

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At the start of the summer season of 1917, although he had no certainty when the havoc of war would subside and Belgium and France would again be open for travel, Mondrian had reason at last to anticipate, accurately rather than unrealistically, his return to Paris. He realized that in Sal Slijper he had an individual to whom he would be able to entrust all of his work when the time came at last for him to leave the Netherlands. By now, he had been back in the Netherlands for longer than he had ever been in Paris, but there was no question that France was home, and he was aware that, whenever he left, he would not be able to take his recent art production with him on the train. His father and sister were in Arnhem, but he saw them infrequently. None of his other Dutch friends—To Hannaert, Van Domselaer, Maris—offered the security and reliability Slijper did.

So here comes in my obsession, my bête noire: anti-Semitism. Slijper's circle of friends in Amsterdam were almost all Jewish. Ben Sanders's mother—the woman with whom Mondrian would dance silently while her son looked on—was Elisabeth Herzberg, an elocutionist who was member of a Jewish family in Amsterdam who regularly began to invite Mondrian to dinner when Mondrian made the train trip from Laren to be near the Rijksmuseum and paint copies. Slijper had lent the Herzbergs Mondrian's work, and told them all about the artist. It was Jewish people who, time and again, came to Mondrian's rescue, and made his life possible; this went back to his Uden landlord, the subject of his viscious caricature. What was it that Mondrian could not grapple with?

XXVI

At the same time when he was reading *Lettres d'un soldat* in the first two months of 1917, and contemplating the arrangements for selling whatever art he completed before returning to Paris, whenever that might be, Mondrian was reworking *Composition in Line*.[1146]

In his studio near Laren, he now made the ground of the entire composition a uniform bright white as he tried to finish the canvas for a show opening on March 10. Still, the painting was not succeeding. On March 7, Mondrian wrote Bremmer to apologize for not having sent his patron a single work in the past year, in spite of receiving his monthly allowance. He explains, 'The main reason is: this year I worked and searched

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[1145] Prins, *Slijper*, p. 154.

[1146] B83 *Compositie in Lijn*, 1917 (Second state), oil on canvas, 108 x 108 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum.

a lot, much of the old had to be changed. I searched for a purer expression: that is why nothing yet satisfied me.'[1147]

Mondrian now thought he had made a mistake in completely covering up the early incarnation of this large painting. He lamented what he had destroyed. He felt he would have been better off leaving the canvas as it was, and starting a new painting rather than revising one that probably was not so bad after all. 'But with searching one never knows *how* in advance.'[1148]

He did not finish the painting he thought he should have left alone earlier on in time for the exhibition. For a while, he simply left it alone. Then, on April 18, Mondrian wrote Slijper that he was back at work on the elusive composition and was 'beginning to like it.'[1149] His mood shifted, and he became convinced it would be ready by May, when he would include it in a show at the Stedelijk.

Then Mondrian ran into unanticipated technical problems. His studio was so cold that the surface that had been pristine began to disintegrate before his eyes. On May 4, Mondrian wrote Bremmer, 'The white ground has cracked in places, owing to all the searching but also because the white would not dry in the cold and the place could not be heated enough.'[1150] To stabilize the ground in time for the exhibition, he switched to zinc white from his usual Crems white.

The results succeeded. *Composition in Line* was done, and went into the show. Bremmer bought the revolutionary painting immediately; it was like nothing he had ever seen before, and ravishingly beautiful. Mondrian quickly wrote to Van Doesburg to tell him the good news. The result of more than a year of revisions is like a view into the universe. *Composition in Line* has a perpetual movement, a constant graceful flow in a myriad of directions simultaneously. The remarkable sequence of lines, varied in width and length, some crossing one another while others stand alone, interact the way that parts of the human body do. In *Composition in Line,* named with such apt simplicity, everything is totally refined, yet nothing has been pre-meditated. Absent a mathematical system, it has an absolute rightness.[1151]

[1147] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, March 7 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

[1148] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, March 7 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

[1149] Letter Mondrian to Slijper, April 18 1917, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 182. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

[1150] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, May 4 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

[1151] The influence of van der Leck is, according to Blotkamp, visible in this work: '*Composition in Line* in its original 1916 state was quite different from the painting we now know […] In the final version of the painting, the lines are much heavier and are cut off straight at the ends, so that they are actually more like blocks […] many of them are shorter and do not intersect in as many places […] The white […] has been activated, as it were, becoming a full and

This salubrious painting appears both spectral and organic, while it does not represent anything known to us. Rather, it is its own world. While solid and nearly palpable, it is floating, immaterial, and spiritual. It inhales and exhales as we look at it, with certain areas inflated and puffed up, others more dense and charged across and up and down the flat surface.

Seemingly sparkling, inexplicably beautiful, inciting multiple rhythms in all directions, this miraculous assemblage composed of nothing whatsoever but short, unmodulated, black horizontal and vertical lines on an equally unmodulated white surface, is an art work for which there was no precedent.

XXVII

For three years now, Mondrian had been living on the run. Even though he had friends, he was essentially alone in the world. He had found ways to scrape together the money he needed to live on, but only made just enough. The dancing he did so awkwardly was his only diversion. With this way of life that would have satisfied few other people, Mondrian was supremely content.

An explorer focused entirely on his expedition, he had every reason to be so happy. At last he had completed an art work that was a major step—a breakthrough in the world of visual experience. Although he was still stuck in the wrong country, he had managed to construct an existence that facilitated his quest—and if he was reduced to living conditions that would have driven even the most resolute itinerants to despair, his difficulties were never with his situation, only with his goal. At last he had succeeded in achieving his own objective of pure, dematerialized, divinely uplifting.

He never complained or questioned what he was doing or why he was living as he did. Mondrian had no bitterness toward people like Simon Maris who had family money and kept earning more because he gave the bourgeoisie what it wanted. The necessity of taking odd jobs was just part of the lot in life Mondrian had chosen for himself; his only frustration was when his art fell short of his goals for it. Yet even when he was on target in the eyes of others, he was constitutionally incapable of praising himself for what he had achieved.

When Mondrian was pleased, he pushed his *self* aside. He did not think he merited credit; all that he praised were the qualities manifest in the painting, as if he had extracted them from the atmosphere. He wrote Bremmer, the rare person who understood his battle with himself, 'I now seem to have found a neat, self-contained way of expression again: I am

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equal element of the work […] The liberation of the linear elements and the activation of the white background are characteristics that hark back to van der Leck's four compositions from 1916.' Blotkamp, *The Art of Destruction*, p. 98.

saying this now that I have completely finished a small canvas for you and am rather pleased with it.'[1152]

The 'seem' and 'rather' encapsulated Mondrian's approach. He was too self-critical to be absolutely certain of his success. On occasion, he felt he had hit the note he wanted, but the assuredness never lasted. It would only be when he was in his seventies that he could use the word "Victory."

Mondrian told Bremmer how grateful he was for his patron's understanding the nature of his work and enabling him 'to continue working in a more appropriate fashion.'[1153] He saw the harsh financial realities that other people might have groused about as being all to the good. He told the man who covered some but not all of the modest expenses of his life in Laren, along with the rent he needed to keep paying for the empty studio in Paris, 'The fact that I still had to take on orders was unavoidable, and, in retrospect, the delay actually helped me, because one needs "time" in order to improve.'[1154] His putting 'time' in quotation marks calls apt attention to the uncertainty of time, the same amorphous quality that *Composition in Line* exudes, where what one achieves in the course of a year might have been concluded in a day, where nothing is fixed, but everything in flux.

The enforced digressions in Mondrian's everyday life had created a distance necessary to his achieving, in the small canvas, the precision as well as the otherness, the lack of reference to anything but itself, the "absoluteness,"
which were the objectives of his art.

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Not that he ever allowed himself to be content for long, but *Composition in Color A* and *Composition in Color B*—Mondrian was probably referring to both these small canvases— about which he wrote Bremmer was certainly reason to be pleased. Each brings the viewer to a halt.[1155]

To see either one of these paired canvases, each measuring about 50 by 45 centimeters, is to find oneself in a new universe. To see the two together is to engage in a playful exchange where many of us would gladly spend hours on end, luxuriating in a trouble-free reprieve from life's usual clobbering. This previously unknown territory is established by blocky dashes of the type Mondrian developed in *Composition in Line*, in the same field as meandering blocks and rectangles in a ravishing trio of mutted ochre, blue, and dusty rose, on a gray-tinged white background. T he

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[1152] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, March 7 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.
[1153] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, March 7 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111.
[1154] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, March 7 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111.
[1155] B84 *Compositie in Kleur A*, 1917, oil on canvas, 50,3 x 45,3 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum; B85 *Compositie in Kleur B*, 1917, oil on canvas, 50/50,5 x 45 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum.

arrangements entertain us and nourish us with their gracefulness. At the same time, they are deeply profound.

"A" and "B" induce a meditative state. Our spirits rise as we look. This is a consequence of their slightly vertical form—even though Mondrian described them as square, each is two inches higher than wide, and of the upward movement within their compositions. If we knew nothing about Mondrian's beliefs or intentions, and just came upon these glorious paintings without having any idea what they were, we would still enter a cosmic sphere, and feel an ambient sense of elation, from the encounter.

We do not necessarily identify the feeling. Nor do we have to have words to describe it. But we feel an inner shift. No personal experience, no history, no narrative has any bearing here. Rather, like sunshine or a calm luminous sea, these paintings have a subliminal effect.

They are comprised of nothing but simple, clean shapes—solid squares and rectangles, or derivatives of squares and rectangles, which are rusty orange, subdued pink, or a powerful celestial blue—along with sharp black dashes, vertical and horizontal, that appear to be either in front of or alongside these colored forms. All of this is on a sea of white, so that the forms appear like actors or dancers on a very large arena. The active elements are much smaller than their setting.

Mondrian studied and refined the color tones ad infinitum, yet kept them fresh and cheerful and light. They render weightless the forms they define. As carefully and precisely as he placed the black marks, they, too, remain playful, like jazz notes. The resultant atmosphere is buoyant.

Each *Composition* assiduously avoids a pattern or any repetition within the design. And there is deliberate asymmetry. To be centered or full of equations would imply a rational ordering; these paintings, on the contrary, have a quality of randomness, of confetti thrown into the air, of smoke floating upwards.

That scatteredness, however, is by no means spontaneous. We do not feel, in either painting, that a single form or line could be repositioned or reproportioned by as much as half a centimeter. The slightest change to any single one of the black dashes in either composition, or to the splendid sequences of colorful rectangles, would cause everything to be lost. Where a blue form and an orange one do not quite touch, but remain separated by a thin amount of the white background—we think of it as the background, the infinity against which everything is set, because, regardless of whether Mondrian painted the white before or after the colors, it seems to exist behind everything else—we have no doubt whatsoever that that separation is fundamental to the success of the painting. When two forms abut one another or one appears to overlap the other and block out part of what it is covering, we feel that that, too, is inevitable.

Facing these canvases, we sense that everything in the world is right. Physically dematerialized, emotionally unburdened, we are removed from

the tribulations of everyday life. Joy and playfulness prevail. Everything is easy.

That transport was no mean achievement. These paintings exude the level of confidence that only comes after hard work. The flippancy is clearly based on know-how and abiding intelligence. What Mondrian set out to do, the otherness he hoped to evoke, are realized in part because he managed to work under rugged conditions, because he was able to screen out everything that mattered, good or bad, except for his goal. The paintings convey that special sense of triumph that emerges when one has overcome endless obstacles and found the omniscience that surmounts all difficulties.

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By making art which did not show the slightest trace of the vicissitudes of his life, not only did Mondrian create something exceptional for others, but he saved himself. The calm and serenity of those compositions provided a safe harbor in tumultuous circumstances. Mondrian was coping with pressures few people could have survived with such equanimity; he had created a solution far more effective than most of the devices with which people try to placate themselves.

On April 18, he wrote Slijper that, having paid his taxes and the coal merchant, he had practically no cash remaining. Food at the communal table was inadequate, and he had to buy some extra groceries to keep going. He wondered if his client could send him twenty guilders in advance, against future purchases.[1156]

The only struggle that had a true chance of defeating him was with his art. He continuously wrote Van Doesburg, Van Assendelft, Bremmer, and Slijper that, even though he went through periods when he was making progress, he was then plagued by a sense that his objective was eluding him. Over and over, it was the same story. He would work his way over a hurdle. Then he would feel back on target. This meant that, suddenly, he would soar with confidence: he was certain that he could sell the latest new work on the easel. In his mind, Bremmer would probably be delighted to buy it. If not, one of his other collectors would. Then, just as precipitious as this leaping with joy, his mood would plummet. In the single movement of a square, he had, he was convinced, lost all that he had gained. The mistake had killed the painting; he was far more certain of his failure than he had been, for a brief moment, of his success.

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Convinced that the two paintings that, a few weeks earlier, had pleased him sufficiently for him to have put them on exhibition, were in fact rife with flaws and limitations, Mondrian willingly accepted advice. On May 16 1917, while the pair of works were subject to the scrutiny of anyone who visited the Stedelijk, Mondrian wrote Van Doesburg, 'As to the blue, you are right too, although the light at the Stedelijk seems to change the color values. In

[1156] Letter Mondrian to Slijper, April 18 1917, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 179.

my – too small – studio the effect was different. It is merely a technical question, anyway; my feeling is that my work had to be made on the scene and in connection with the scene itself. I also regard my work as the new decorative art, in which the pictorial merges with the decorative.'[1157]

Mondrian willingly considered Van Doesburg's viewpoint about the blue because he knew that everyone perceives color differently, and colors change according to their settings. And he was not posturing in declaring his search for the absolute as entirely consistent with making "the new decorative art." Decoration, after all, had the power to transform the setting of one's everyday existence. Mondrian did not believe art was meant for worship; he had no wish to follow the example of church art meant to instruct on religion, or of his father's lithographs intended to impart messages relating to history or the rules of human conduct. Rather, he was simply providing people with a salubrious experience. His own immediate surroundings at the moment were the décor of a boarding house and of a small studio which belonged to someone else, but in his mind he was envisioning a completely new milieu in which what was on the wall would merge with the wall. It seems that Mondrian, mentally, was already moving his paintings and solid planes of color up and down and sideways on the walls at the rue du Départ.

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Mondrian installed *Composition in Color A* and *B* as precisely at the Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring show at the Stedelijk as he had positioned the colors and forms within the paintings themselves. To see these two paintings today at the Kröller-Müller Museum, their home, or in traveling exhibitions is in no way to have the same experience as viewing them in the way Mondrian intended. In July, he sent Van Doesburg a photo of the Stedelijk installation emphasizing how pleased he was with it. The installation 'shows the religious etc. etc. so well, and the placing together of the three is quite expressive.'[1158] This was the closest to hyperbole he would get verbally—the only way he could voice passion was with paint—but the ardor transcends the understatement of the 'etc.etc.' and the 'quite.'

The wall was matte black. *Composition in Line (Second State)* was hung high, well above eye level. *Composition in Color B* hung to the left of it, low down. *A* hung to the right of it, equally low down. The intervals between the paintings are eighteen inches—the same measurement, exactly, as the width of the smaller paintings themselves. The bottom corners of *Composition in Line* lines up with the exact middles of *B* and *A*. This exact placement of the two colored works in relation to the large black and white canvas creates an overall effect which far exceeds the impact of any of the paintings alone;

[1157] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 16 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 258.

[1158] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, July 7 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

a single element without the others in correct juxtaposition is like a predella panel in a museum when the altarpiece in which it belongs remains in a church in a different country.[1159]

XXVIII

By May, the condition of *Composition in Line* was significantly worse. Mondrian never despaired or became frantic, but seeing the product of a year's work begin to disintegrate made him analyze the problem closely. The cracking he had first noted in May had intensified. 'Unfortunately the white ground has cracked in places, owing to all the searching but also because the white would not dry in the cold and the place could not be heated enough; perhaps, too, because for the first time I used zinc white instead of Crems white. Luckily the colors remain untouched.'[1160] With his new recessed frames, of the simplest white painted strips, he had found the means to impose as little as possible on what was to be impeccable overall. This troublesome disturbance in the background—which, logically, would only intensify with time—would have prompted someone of a different temperament to redo, or even destroy the canvas.

Mondrian, however, was willing to let the painting go into the world as it was. Bremmer bought *Composition in Line* directly out of the Stedelijk exhibition and Mondrian never re-did the white. The two smaller Compositions in color had gone to Bremmer as well, as part of their contract arrangement whereby Mondrian owed him four paintings for the stipend he had now been receiving for over a year, and he was happy to see the three works remain as a unit, and to have an influx of cash for the large one, even as it threatened to crumble. The purely material aspect of painting did not concern Mondrian all that much. His task had been to locate the forms and adjust the colors, to create the living being. From then on, his approach was practically Zen. What happened, happened.

Today, when we look at Mondrians everywhere with their white surfaces cracking, so that generally they resemble shattered eggshells that have retained their form but become covered with fissures, their condition should not be read as a disturbance, but as a state of affairs consistent with Mondrian's vision. Paintings, like all living beings, change in time. Mondrian not only accepted the instability of life, but honored it. Perpetually moving colored panels up and down his studio walls, he exalted in the change inherent to the universe. What was sacred to him was life itself, with all its

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[1159] Blotkamp has written about this specific installation in relation to Bart van der Leck's "mine triptych" *Compositie 1916 No. 4*, 1916 from the Kröller-Müller Museum. Blotkamp, *Mondriaan in detail*, p. 114-119.

[1160] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, May 4 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 256.

ebb and flow, and not just his own life, or that of one of his paintings, but the endless time and space of the cosmos.

XIX

Paris was heavily bombed that spring and summer. Mondrian continued camping out where he could in Laren, and painting vigorously. He was resigned to the effects of world events on his own way of life, and seemingly impervious to their impact on other people. Van Doesburg asked him to join in starting a new magazine, in which he could publish parts of his new book, and he replied that he was willing to do so because Van Doesburg had 'a pure attitude toward the New Plastic.'[1161] The battle for abstraction—not the escalating war and record-breaking number of deaths on the battlefields of Europe—was the most pressing issue to Mondrian. Its priority was a direct consequence of the destruction and havoc beyond his control; with a re-forming of the visual world so that was absent the mess of human behavior, or the march toward death inherent to nature, Mondrian could conteract all that was beyond him. The intensifed bombing of Paris was like cracking white paint: Mondrian was resigned to forces and events where he was incapable of impact, while devoted to a safe harbor from them.

Schoenmaekers was given credit for inventing the term 'the New Plastic.' But, as you already know, the anonymous writer of *Lettres d'un soldat* had written, on Christmas Day of 1914, that his own art work 'was pure thought,' and his 'chief ambition […] was simply to give plastic form to this thought as it developed.' The soldier had declared his search for 'the eternal aspiration after harmony.'[1162] Via Mondrian, this unlikely source had provided Van Doesburg's and Mondrian's new faith with both their underlying concepts and the perfect language to codify them.

Mondrian had by now cooled even more than before on Schoenmaekers as a person. Having considered Schoenmaekers a 'true brother' who would be the ideal editor of his new book on that 'New Plastic,' he now crossed the mathematician completely off of his list of friends.[1163] The sequence of events was the same that had occurred in his friendship with Kickert, and would repeat itself in his relationship with Van Doesburg. An initial intellectual rapport would lead to a camaraderie that would flourish until

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[1161] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 16 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 111. For a detailed founding history of *De Stijl*, see: Sjoerd van Faassen & Hans Renders, 'Theo van Doesburg en de oprichting van *De Stijl*', in: *Piet Mondriaan en Bart van der Leck. De uitvinding van een nieuwe kunst. Laren 1916-1918*, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, Den Haag / WBooks, Zwolle 2017, p. 117-145, 164-166.
[1162] Lemercier, *Letters,* p. 19-20.
[1163] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 16 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

disagreements prompted a falling out. Mondrian was never fazed by the schisms; he had witnessed enough of them in his childhood to accept them as the norm. While he accepted the necessity of human relationships, the moment they were disruptive to the equilibrium of life, they were best eliminated.

Only the friends whose interests were very different from Mondrian's own, people like Albert van den Briel, could hold their positions. Like his brothers, they remained in his orbit. But these were relationships that consisted of, at most, a single visit a year, and a couple of letters. Above all else, Mondrian required walls and space.

XXX

By mid-summer, Mondrian was almost ready to publish the text he had been writing and revising for the past two years. He had also started four new paintings, and was confident that he was making true progress on them. The writing and painting were imbued with his "religious" fealty to total abstraction.

When he placed *Composition in Line* next to a new composition by Van der Leck, he became distressed by the presence of recognizable subject matter in his friend's work. In spite of its rendering of animals as composites of pure geometric forms, its representation of the known world made it completely unacceptable to Mondrian. He told Van der Leck that the visibility of two donkeys as the basis of the squares and triangles was not just a shortfall, but a travesty.[1164] It was a form of imitation. Van der Leck had been one of the few artist Mondrian ever credited with having a direct impact on his own art. The decisiveness of Van der Leck's lines and the precision of his clear edges had inspired him; he was grateful. But he was adamant that the application of those technical advances to the rendition of donkeys totally destroyed the work his young colleague had chosen for the new magazine.

This was not simply a matter of taste; it was Mondrian's lifeblood. He abhorred Van der Leck's illustrative qualities because they betrayed the values that consumed him. His mission was to create an art that was generalized and universal, that was an "other," as pure could be. Mondrian also suffered from a neurotic aversion to farm animals, but if that extreme distaste and his absolute insistence on non-referential abstraction were connected, he failed to see the link.

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[1164] 'Ik zeidde v.d. Leck dat ik zijn ding dat gereproduceerd is toch nog te veel "zichtbaar" geabstraheerd vond (je ziet nog de ezeltjes enz.)', letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, July 7 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

Mondrian and Van der Leck had initially agreed to be named as editors of the new periodical. In May, Mondrian had told Van Doesburg they had changed their minds and would only be writers for it.[1165] Mondrian was deliberately streamlining his life, reducing his activities as he moved his art into its new, purer territory. In his current paintings, he was bringing the forms and colors into sharper focus, and he concentrated his energies to do so.

One of his new acquaintances in Laren, J.M. Maronier, nine years his junior, office manager for the Dutch Railways and an amateur artist, would, in 1976, write a letter to the Dutch art historian and eminent Mondrian scholar Carel Blotkamp describing Mondrian that summer as 'a quiet, introverted man.' For two solid weeks, he was 'working on a trained apple tree. Every day a line, which […] led […] to the planes of primary colors surrounded by black lines.'[1166] Mondrian told Maronier, as he did to anyone who was interested, that, even though he studied the tree that had been tied and banded to impose oder and regularity on its natural development, he would allow no figurative references in his art. It did not suffice for him simply to do so; he had to announce the policy regularly.

Yet Mondrian had not yet severed himself entirely from nature as his initial source. His guide toward abstraction was that tree that had been subjected to human intervention. A gardener had controlled the natural growth of the tree's branches and re-determined their direction. The analogy to Mondrian's own work is striking. Like someone altering the structure of an apple tree, Mondrian would always, regardless of the absence of representation, maintain an indisputable aliveness at the core.

Still, he had, at last, completely achieved the breakthrough to the disappearance of the visible source. Following the two *Composition with Color*, the five new paintings into which Mondrian had launched himself were called *Composition with Color Planes.*[1167] Each presented pure rectangles of unmodulated color, separated by white ground, and nothing more. On September 5, Mondrian wrote Van Assendelft, 'The great search is over

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[1165] 'Does, ik heb van avond met van der Leck nog eens over de zaak gepraat: wij vinden 't het beste als jij je alleen als redacteur opgeeft (op titel enz.) jij bent toch al tamelijk wel als "schrijver" ook bekend: ons zullen ze misschien uitlachen. We schrijven wel, maar je geeft ons niet als medewerkers op.' Postscript to letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 21 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

[1166] Letter J.M. Maronier to Carel Blotkamp, August 21 1976, as quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 112.

[1167] B87 *Composition with Color Planes 1*, 1917, Private collection; B88 *Composition with Color Planes 2*, 1917, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen; B89 *Compositie No.3, with Color Planes 3*, 1917, Gemeentemuseum; B90 *Composition with Color Planes 4*, 1917, Private collection; B91 *Compositie No.5, with Color Planes 5*, 1917, Museum of Modern Art.

now, at least for the time being.'[1168] These exuberant creations based on limited elements succesfully excluded anything extraneous.

They were a spectacular leap. In the first of these, a gouache on paper, and the four oils on canvas that followed, Mondrian reduced his vocabulary to three colors—essentially in the yellow/pink/blue triad, although varied from canvas to canvas—against white. He had made the colored forms larger than in his previous work, like players that have moved to the front of the stage, and, concomitantly, reduced the background relative to them. The floating rectangles scarcely touch, yet, in the way they hover next to one another, they are perpetually in a form of union.

The weightless squares or near-squares and occasional rectangle have a luminosity that make them a perfect manifestation of J.M.W. Turner's notion that color and light are the same. These works are as ethereal as music. The more one looks, the more one feels the motion, and the brilliance with which the intervals of white—sometimes narrow slivers, sometimes units equal in scale to the forms of color—keep that motion going.

The results of Mondrian's careful calibration and joyous absorption in abstraction have a spectacular assuredness. So, now, did the artist himself. Having completely eliminated the known world from his art, he was newly confident.

XXXI

In November 1917, the first issue of the magazine *De Stijl* appeared.[1169] Five years later, in its fifth anniversary issue, Theo van Doesburg, in his capacity as its editor, would credit Mondrian for having started, four years earlier, the approach to painting and design for which the magazine was named.[1170] The periodical presented multiple aspects of the art movement of which Mondrian was considered the inventor.

Van der Leck would ultimately claimed—to Michel Seuphor, in the 1950s, that *he* was the father. He insisted that after Mondrian brought him to Van Doesburg's studio and introduced the two, Van Doesburg had almost immediately begun to copy him, and that was how the new style

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[1168] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, September 5 1917, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 14. Quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 112.

[1169] Van Faassen, *De oprichting van De Stijl*, p. 142.

[1170] 'Hoewel verscheidene kunstenaars in verschillende landen, bewust en onbewust aan de nieuwe beeldende uitdrukkingswijze gearbeid hebben, kwam de schilder Piet Mondrian omstreeks 1913, als consequente doorvoering van het kubisme, het eerst tot realiseering der nieuwe Beelding als schilderij. […] Zoo werd "De Stijl", die in Mondrian den vader der nieuwe beelding begroet.' *De Stijl* 5(1922)12, p. 178.

really got going—not with Mondrian.[1171] The issue would become a rat's nest—it still is—for art historians trying to tackle the question of whether a single individual started De Stijl. Michel Seuphor maintained that Van Doesburg gave Mondrian credit as its founder only to make sure that no one thought that Van der Leck was too important. "'That's the sort of person Van Doesburg was. No ideas of his own. And a cheat into the bargain,'" as Michel Seuphor quotes Van der Leck.[1172]

The only person who was above all this jockeying for preeminence was Mondrian himself. The issues of "credit" or fame—and ego—had no role in his life; He was focused only on the issue of pure abstraction, plain and simply. And as Jaffé has pointed out, that focus on pure abstraction was exactly the group's 'shared point of departure: the principle of absolute abstraction—that is to say, the complete elimination of any reference to objects in nature.' But as he continues, 'this initial description reveals only the method of De Stijl, not its scope or its philosophical outlook.'[1173]

The editorial statement of the first issue of *De Stijl* in 1917 established that purpose independent of all individual glory. The goal was 'a new aesthetic awareness' that would counter 'the prevailing archaic muddle' with 'the logical principles of a new style.' The artists whose work and writing would appear in the magazine were uniformly devoted to 'the emergence of plastic consciousness.' They would be united in their wish 'to awaken aesthetic sensibility among laymen.'[1174]

Color was one of the vehicles of this awakening, and the majority of the evangelists would be painters rather than architects—who, the editors felt, intrinsically avoided 'meddling with color, which should be the business of the painter'[1175]—but the plastic consciousness could be inspired only in white as well, and the architect J.J.P. Oud was included in that first issue along with Mondrian, Van der Leck, and Van Doesburg.

Some of the ideas elegantly codified in the Dutch magazine would be echoed two years later when the Bauhaus was formed in Weimar in Germany. Both movements rose from the determination to counteract academic approaches to painting and design dependent on historical styles. The Bauhaus, however, would give equal space to a range of arts and crafts, whereas *De Stijl,* regardless of Oud's inclusion*,* focused on abstract art 'and first of all painting'.[1176] *De Stijl* advocated the rise of the 'authentically modern artist' with 'a double mission. First, to produce the plastically pure

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[1171] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 138. Sjoerd van Faassen and Hans Renders mention Van der Leck's claims in: Van Faassen, *De oprichting van De Stijl*, p. 132.
[1172] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 138.
[1173] Hans L.C. Jaffé, 'Introduction', in: Mildred Friedman (ed.), *De Stijl: 1917-1931. Visions of Utopia*, Phaidon, Oxford 1982, p. 10.
[1174] (red.) 'Ter Inleiding', in: *De Stijl* 1(1917)1, p. 3. Translation quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 141.
[1175] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 138.
[1176] Jaffé, 'Introduction', p. 14.

work of art: then to make the public capable of experiencing this pure art.'[1177]

In theory, the magazine *De Stijl* was the tool of an entire movement which was to be a collective enterprise. The underlying principle was that when artists recognized 'their basic equality' and banded together in developing 'a universal plastic language, they will no longer remain timorously attached to their individualism. They will go beyond this individualism and seek to serve the universal principle.' The objective was 'a spiritual community.'[1178] Artists were expected to renounce personal ambition if this were to thrive and produce a new style. It sounded great, but as Van der Leck's swipes made clear, the suspension of the human ego was not a reality.

Mondrian, meanwhile, not only shrugged off the issue of who had what role, but did not care that he was a better painter than the others. He happily accepted the group agenda, and gladly acknowledged his learning from his fellow artists—at one moment, Picasso, at another, Van der Leck. He was as distinguished from the other De Stijl painters in his level of sheer talent as he had been from his fellow students at the Rijksakademie—and, then, people like Jan Toorop in Domburg—yet he never revealed any sense of superiority or rivalry. He respected everyone's efforts, and did not compete. His battles were bruising, but they were only with himself. All that mattered to Mondrian was that he achieve his elusive goal to maximum effect. He rarely felt he succeeded. Unlike almost all other people who make art or write, he never disparaged anyone else. His own toughest judge, he imposed his demanding standards on himself alone.

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What mattered to Mondrian above all else about De Stijl is that the first issue of the magazine named for the same movement enabled him to publish his introduction to *Neo-Plasticism in Painting.* The essay linked the new art to overall changes occurring for all of humanity. Mondrian believed that a general transformation was in process, and that civilization was in a forward momentum. He opens the essay declaring, 'The life of modern cultured man is gradually turning away from the natural: life is becoming more and more *abstract.*'[1179]

This individual Mondrian was describing was, more than anyone else, himself, yet he believed he was describing a trend that, soon enough, would be global. Out of naïvete or blindness, he failed to recognize that the impact of the current war engulfing much of Europe prevented people from

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[1177] (red.) 'Ter Inleiding', in: *De Stijl* 1(1917)1, p. 3. Translation quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 141.
[1178] (red.) 'Ter Inleiding', in: *De Stijl* 1(1917)1, p. 1-2. Translation quoted from Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 141
[1179] Piet Mondriaan, 'De Nieuwe Beelding in de Schilderkunst', in: *De Stijl* I(1917)1, p. 2. Translation quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.

considering other issues or prizing abstraction as a way out as he did. While Mondrian saw people as moving into the world of vision disconnected from nature, most were focused only on the need to rush into cellars during aerial bombardments and cope with food shortages. Mondrian was simply unaware of the distinction between his own rare persona and that of the majority of human beings in Western Europe in a time period when aircraft was strafing the ground with bombs.

The 'modern cultured man'—Mondrian himself—was a rarity. Few other people could fill the bill when he wrote, 'The life of *truly modern* man is directed neither toward the material for its own sake nor toward the predominantly emotional: rather, it takes the form of the autonomous life of the human spirit becoming conscious.'[1180] When he published those words in 1917, few people could have the luxury of such autonomy, of distance from the realities of the daily destruction of lives, neighborhoods, even parkland.

If the forty-five Mondrian was disingenuous, however, it was not because his own circumstances were especially privileged. It was because external conditions mattered so little to him, which always had been and always would be the case.

Mondrian's statement of the recent achievements of the human race are more optimistic than factual; nearly a hundred years later, one is hard-pressed to find, in the intervening century, many exemplars of his statement that 'Modern man […] manifests a changed consciousness' removed from materialism and private emotions. Zen monks aside, in general the trend has been toward increased, not less, emphasis on money, things, and the self. Mondrian's 'modern man' was his ideal, and he was too intrinsically modest, and lacking in self-awareness, to recognize that of anyone he knew, he was the one closest to it.

In this essay that sums up a lot of his thinking from the previous three years, ever since his circumstances landed him in Laren, Mondrian calls for a new art that will embody the 'more positively abstract' aspect of his 'Modern Man.' He writes, 'Art too, as the product of a new duality in man, is increasingly expressed as the product of a cultivated outwardness and of a deeper, more conscious inwardness.'[1181] What Phyllis Greenacre characterized as his walls were deliberately just that: manifestations of the 'outwardness' he thought was desirable, and the result of his going inward: not to private personal experience and emotional reactions, but to safe territory where the self not buffeted by the world. He was seeking depths that are not mired by childhood traumas, a state of being devoid of pain; to reach that inner tranquility, one had to be highly conscious without being

[1180] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 2. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.
[1181] All Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 2. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.

self-conscious. He continues, 'As pure creation of the human *spirit*, art is expressed as pure aesthetic creation manifested in abstract form. The truly modern artist *consciously* […] recognizes aesthetic emotion as cosmic, universal.'[1182]

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What the artist himself wrote in 1917 is another key to why *Composition in Blue and White* intoxicated the ten-year old me, and to the ultimate, unique achievement of Piet Mondrian's art. No painting representing skiing, and hiking to mountaintops, the experience invoked by the painting, could have the impact of those activities. Only a nearly empty canvas with a few rhythmically placed straight horizontal and vertical lines and a single precise rectangle of color could elicit the same sheer emotional transport. Mondrian's belief that 'pure, abstract form' was the language that could induce a sense of the 'cosmic' and 'universal' with the power to induce 'aesthetic emotion' is exemplified in this simple resplendent painting with its vibrating black lines and glorious whiteness and calming blue. The beliefs he voiced in 1917 are at the core of his own greatest achievements and the kernel of their extraordinary power.

In the period when he published these words in that first issue of *De Stijl,* Mondrian was developing a form of beauty that transcends the issues of verbal language, age, and knowledge. Painting in pure colors and geometric forms on lustrous whites, he freed himself, authentically, of all the burdens of life. And he leapt to an unprecedented sight that encapsulates eternal wonder.

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With its reduced vocabulary of shapes and limited but bold palette, the 'consistent abstraction'[1183] Mondrian championed would produce a state of being different from any previously known in human life. The 'Compositions with Color' Mondrian had painted while writing the essay were a splendid first foray in that direction.

His approach, embodied in those canvases, was counter to the thrust of most twentieth-century thought. The more prevalent search was for new ways to delve into the human mind. That trend dominates our own era even more. Scientists try to understand moods; the vagaries of the psyche are scrutinized; the nature of one's personal relationships is regarded as fundamental to one's emotional well-being. People explore ways of feeling better and happier dependent on a closer exploration of psychological complexity, on hormones, a vitamin deficiency and personal wiring and exercise and food intake. Sexuality is examined in depth. One's individual chemistry, all the mysteries inside the self, are to be understood, and

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[1182] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 2. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.

[1183] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 3. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.

possibly modified. Mondrian turned *outside*. He concerned himself with none of this; he sought instead a 'universal plastic means'[1184] that would solve life's issues by providing an *other*.

The language he was developing, and the state of being it would achieve, would, if he succeeded, be valid in all places, at all times, for all people. Once those 'universal plastic means […] were discovered there emerged, almost of its own accord, an exact plastic of pure relationships—thus the essence of all emotion of plastic beauty."[1185] The words are less clear than his art, but the gist was his craving for "the determinate plastic expression of aesthetic relationships."[1186] Precisely controlled interactions among lines and colors could, he believed, become a resource for every aspect of human existence. The aesthetic was to be the blood and guts of life.

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Mondrian's entire book—*The New Plastic in Painting*—would appear chapter by chapter in the next twelve issues of *De Stijl*, published between then and October 1918, with the exception of issue six, the one that appeared in April, 1918. In synopsis, the ideas about which he had been writing over the two preceding years on almost every possible free evening—except when he was dancing at the Hamdorff — are original and ingenious. But the way he wrote, evident if one reads each chapter in its entirety, was pathological. Mondrian's narrative is a manifestation of what today would be categorized as one or another personality disorder or behavioral syndrome. Extraordinarily repetitious and obtuse, it is the writing of someone speaking with no concern for his audience's reactions. While the underlying ideas, when quoted judiciously and summarized to be made cogent, are brilliant, their expression teeters on madness.

In his painting, Mondrian reduced his vocabulary, clarified his vision, and achieved jewel-like results which immediately induce pleasure. In his writing, he came up with statements like: 'Thus the new plastic is dualistic through its composition. Through its exact plastic expression of cosmic relationship it is a direct expression of the universal.'[1187] Ten pages later, one falls upon 'Until now periods of culture arose when a particular individual (above and beyond the people) awakened the universal in the masses' at the start of a long paragraph that concludes with 'Therefore, in art today the individual can be expressed as the determinately universal.'[1188] Then, as if he

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[1184] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 3. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28.
[1185] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 3. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 28-29.
[1186] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 3. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 29.
[1187] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 6. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 31.
[1188] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 17-18. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 35.

has never said it before, he starts a new chapter: 'The new plastic can be called abstract not only because it is the direct expression of the universal but also because its expression includes the individual (or naturalistic concreteness).'[1189] Four pages later, one arrives at: 'Modern art follows ancient art in accentuating the planarity of natural reality, and is only a more consistent expression of the same idea: the plastic conception. […] Finally, the new plastic is the manifestation of this conception, the manifestation of the purely aesthetic idea.'[1190]

Two pages further into the narrative, you get: 'In all art, it is through composition (as opposed to rhythm) that some measure of the universal is plastically manifested and the individual is also more or less abolished.'[1191] Leaf further along in the text and you find 'Subjectivization of the universal in art lowers the universal on the one hand, while on the other it makes possible the ride of the individual toward the universal.'[1192] Seven pages after that, Mondrian writes 'In art we have direct plastic expression of the universal (the equilibrated plastic of relationships), noncorporeal in its manifestation and therefore free of the temporal that obscures the eternal.'[1193] But surely the reader knew as much by now.

It simply goes on and on and on. Perhaps the people who read the chapters with intervals of a month between each encounter, facing only a few pages at a time as they appeared in *De Stijl*, enjoyed it more in small doses. *The New Plastic in Painting* as a finished book *is* over fifty pages long, with Mondrian perpetually repeating the same ideas, each time as if he has just discovered them. If Mondrian's art was not so beautiful, no editor would have allowed this to be printed without taking a hatchet to it. In words, this great reductive painter was oddly like his father: pounding in his redundancies ad infinitum.

Even when the chapters were parsed out, one wonders who had the patience for a treadmill of sentences like 'Abstract-real life finds abstract manifestation in Abstract-Real painting but yet to find its palpable manifestation.'[1194] Could anyone have imagined that, especially with the war still not over, people could have focused on this?

[1189] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 29. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 35.
[1190] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 42. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 37.
[1191] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 44. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 39.
[1192] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 51. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 41-42.
[1193] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 89. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 49.
[1194] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 126. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 59.

Mondrian, of course, did not care. He was too absorbed in his own beliefs.

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The chapter on what is female or male makes the reader come to, however. Here Mondrian expounds on the ideas he first wrote down in 1912 in the small sketchbooks he filled in Domburg. If you are patient enough to get through the verbiage, excessive as usual, you find a magnificent truthfulness. Whether you agree with Mondrian's point of view, you know he is doing what most people find impossible: stating his deepest feelings without dissembling in any way.

He writes:

> 'The extreme opposites that find their plastic expression in Abstract-Real painting can be seen not only as outwardness and inwardness, as nature and spirit, as individual and universal, but also as female and male elements. In art too it is important to see the duality of life in this way, for this duality is then perceived from the viewpoint of life itself, and thus the unity of life and art within ourselves is clearly revealed. Conversely, the concept of female and male elements, as they are manifested in life, becomes alive in us when they are seen plastically. Anything concerning inwardness and outwardness that the new plastic makes perceptible through its plastic manifestation also clarified the female-male relationship and its significance—also in life.'[1195]

Suddenly, having brought up the gender dynamics, Mondrian makes a summary statement that is more trenchant and to-the-point than anything he has said previously. The goal of the new plastic is to express 'the content of the new consciousness (greater equilibrium in the duality of all life).' He amplifies: 'It also shows determinately what makes this equilibrium in life possible: it shows how the female element must become related to the male element and conversely.'[1196]

If I could only have been across the table from Mondrian in Hannaert's dining room in Laren, I would have argued that it is not only in the new plastic that this occurs. An intensely charged male/female equilibrium underlies, for example, the art of Poussin. But, there is no debating that the New Plastic strips it down to its essentials.

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Following that first paragraph in his concluding chapter, Mondrian goes even further than he did in the sketchbooks in explaining his concept of

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[1195] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 140. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 64-65.

[1196] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 140-141. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 65.

what is male and what female (generally but not always in that order). In the lines and colors and composition of 'the New Plastic' (usually with an upper case N and P, but not always), maleness is 'represented in whatever expresses the universal, the inward.' Femaleness is evoked by 'whatever expressed the individual, the outward.'[1197]

What was he thinking about when he wrote this? His father preaching about God and goodness while his mother attended to the household's needs and demonstrated some affection to the children? Or did he have in mind his sense of himself as a profoundly spiritual, dematerialized human being, and the women in his life, from his fiancées and almost-fiancées to the whores, as creatures with a degree of warmth and personality but an absence of depth?

Then Mondrian says something that I, at least, find completely confusing.

> 'If the plastic of equilibrated relationships is the purest expression of harmony, then this expression of harmony consists of the interiorization of the female and the determination of the male. If we see the female and male as the two-forces-in-one that determine life, the new Plastic shows that only through their interiorization can these forces—outward as both have become—reveal their original unity in life, and thus bring out determinately the inner harmony of life. It can then be seen that only purified female and purified male elements can bring this out in all of life's relationships.'[1198]

Maybe you can see what Mondrian wants to communicate more clearly than I do. My only stab at understanding comes when I picture any of the artist's finest compositions from the body of the work he had recently begun at the time that he wrote this, and would now be refining for the rest of his life. Confronting the whiteness, the crisp black lines, and the utterly distilled reds, yellows, and blues of Mondrian's mature art, it strikes me that his way of gaining inner harmony was not simply to purify, but in effect to sterilize himself. He had to eliminate all the complications that female and male instincts in the self can engender. Is this what he meant?

Today one cannot pick up a newspaper or magazine without reading discussions of gayness in the military, same-sex marriage, repressed homosexuality as a hallmark of homophobia, maternal fathers, gender identity, metrosexuality, transgenderism, lesbian parenting, etc. Most people are drawn to these issues, whether with identification or opposition. The

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[1197] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 141. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 65.
[1198] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 141. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 65.

public is not merely curious, it is obsessed. What was accepted as natural in ancient Greece and ancient Rome and certain non-Western societies has caused intense discomfort to others. Today everyone addresses and mentally considers questions of physical relations between people of the same sex, but, in Mondrian's lifetime, the concept was rarely accepted—in others, or in one's self. Mondrian, whatever his issues were, chose the unusual solution of interiorizing all of what he calls 'these forces,' both the male and the female. He sought to purify—the word he consistently underlines—himself. And his art was, starting in the period when he had broken his marriage engagement and stopped having girlfriends of consequence, a manifestation of that purification.

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In this text that he wrote in those nights in Laren, Mondrian formulated who and how he would be for the rest of his life. Categorizing various aspects of the human mind and putting each element into its own compartment, he isolated and encased parts of the psyche as surely as he would circumscribe his colors with black borders. He cast gender traits with particular concision. Mondrian writes, "The outward female (the natural) is beauty, which is manifestation of spirit (or the pure male). The pure male is truth (see part 5)."[1199]

That instruction to 'see Part 5' leads us to what Mondrian means by his definition of truth. 'Part 5' is entitled 'From the Natural to the Abstract: from the Indeterminate to the Determinate.'[1200] Had Mondrian written an autobiography, that would have been a perfect title for it.

In 'part 5' Mondrian quotes a book published in Leiden in 1904, *Pure Reason*, by G.J.P.J. Bolland, a prominent Dutch follower of Hegel.[1201] He identifies the citation as coming from page 554, making clear that he has consciously read a lengthy text to get the nugget:

'The beautiful is the true in the perceptual mode. And truth is a multiple unity of opposites; if we can find the beautiful in the true, then it must be found as a unity-in-diversity of opposites. […] The concept of beauty is a relational one.'[1202]

Which is it? Is the ideal—truth—the embodiment of maleness and nothing else, as Mondrian told us before, or is it comprised of the balance of male and female traits elucidated by Bolland?

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[1199] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, Aantekening 3, p. 145. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, note e, p. 65

[1200] Part 5 in the *Collected Writings* corresponds to part VIII in *De Stijl* 1(1918)9.

[1201] G.J.P.J. Bolland, *Zuivere Rede: een boek voor vrienden der wijsheid*, Adriani, Leiden 1904.

[1202] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 103. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected Writings*, p. 51.

Mondrian's struggle to reconcile opposing elements of the self emerges in his feverish underlining in this chapter of his book. Whenever he accentuates an idea by putting that emphatic crawl underneath it, he naturally summons our attention; Mondrian wants us to know that he has arrived at a major moment, and we respond with sharpened attention.

> 'The union of the universal (as far as it has developed in man) with the individual (as far as it has matured in man) gives rise to the tragic; the struggle of one against the other forms the tragedy of life. Tragedy arises from inequality in the appearance of the duality by which unity manifests itself—within space and time. The tragic exists both in inward and in outward life.'[1203]

It is fair to assume that Mondrian is writing about himself above all, and here we get close to him—or at least to his sense of himself. He lets us know that when his notion of the universal—which is the goal of his art and therefore the purpose of everything in his existence—is in conflict with the personal, when his own needs and emotions get in the way of the distillation he is trying to achieve, the situation is tragic. He is clearly referring to some extreme form of suffering when he writes of the tragedy present 'both in inward and in outward life.'

Mondrian's own outward life is evident in the photos of him standing to the side when friends gathered in Amsterdam studios at the turn of the century, in the description of him holding forth like a preacher, delivering monologues, and failing to engage with others. That was how he danced: ramrod rigid, not in partnership. The inward life is easy to imagine. It was centered on a relationship with his father that he would portray as conflictual in spite of the obvious fealty, and on the feeling of abandonment when Uncle Frits rejected him and his work so completely as to demand a change in the spelling of their last name. Mondrian may also have been preoccupied with the homosexual scandal when he was in Brabant, and with the broken wedding engagements. 'The greatest tragedy is due to the inherently unequal dualism of spirit and nature,' he goes on to say.[1204] It is always nature that he is trying to get beyond. He would, famously, insist on not seeing trees; he would, neurotically, not permit anything living in his studio, to the extent of having his famous plaster flower in a vase. With his reduced diet, his presumed sexual abstinence, his essential isolation, he was trying to avoid his own nature.

That avoidance served his art, and his art enabled him to replace his discomfort with joy.

[1203] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 104-105. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 52.
[1204] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 105. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 52.

By the time he wrote all this in 1917, Mondrian well understood the intense symbiotic relationship between his way of living and his artistic choices. He declared 'Art, then, is a field of combat against the individual….'[1205] Not only were his paintings his means of reconciling maleness and femaleness while juxtaposing the vertical and horizontal with the vertical inevitably reigning, and by having color loom above the whiteness, but, even more than that, it was his way to eradicate the individual, the natural, all that he associated with femaleness, in deference to the universality, the 'truth' that was, according to his particular vision (however bizarre it may seem to the rest of us), the essence of maleness.

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How extraordinary: a man who, in middle age, turning age forty-five, formulated his beliefs, codified the recent changes in himself and his work, and then adhered, meticulously, to his new philosophy and practices for the rest of his life. Equating maleness with truth, Mondrian expands on his notion of 'the tragic.' In this text which summarizes his deepest beliefs, he latches on to the terms: 'Truth', 'Beauty', 'The Universal', 'The Natural', and 'The Tragic' as if all of life consists of resolving the position of each in one's own life. Reading him is like seeing the planes of solid color he kept moving around on his studio wall, or the squares of different hues in his checkerboard paintings. Mondrian treats life as consisting of polarities that either exist apart or in combination. As in chemistry, everything is a matter of juggling the elements, and of determining proportions.

He thus identifies the components of "the tragic":

> 'The premature union of opposites causes the tragic. Yet only the continual and repeated union of the opposites can bring about the new—progress; which is possible because new form arises through the merging of opposites into each other.
> Thus plastic expression of pure (exact) relationship is possible only when the natural in man and the spiritual within him dissolve into each other: thereby his vision of the natural is transformed, that is, it becomes <u>abstract</u>.'[1206]

By that 'union' which 'causes the tragic,' is he referring to the combination of maleness and femaleness which could be manifest in homosexuality? Or does he mean the reconciliation of maleness and femaleness that could in theory take one *out* of the sexual realm, with the individual/natural subsumed by the universal? Had the union been premature—his word—in his own case, he would never have had the time in his life when he painted

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[1205] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 105. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 52.
[1206] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 105. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 53.

natural subjects, considered marriage, and, we presume, had sex of some form. Fortunately the union came later, the opposites merging at the appropriate moment to be salubrious rather than tragic.

Whatever form of 'premature union' Mondrian had in mind, by 1915 to 17, when he was writing this text which would determine the path of the rest of his life, he believed that, for him, the natural and spiritual had indeed dissolved into one another. He was, in his art and his life, entirely ensconced in the 'abstract' and the 'new plastic.' 'The tragic' was behind him. He had gone to the next level of existence, a higher one: just the way that the central figure of the "Transformation Triptych" had.

XXXII

'The tragic can be transcended.'[1207] Mondrian sneaks that idea in as the second part of a sentence with which he ends a paragraph. It is well into his compulsive reiterations of what 'Abstract-real' means, and could easily escape the reader. But it is pivotal.

To advise on how that blessed transcendence can occur, Mondrian first summarizes the essence of the tragic—with a brief analysis of the art of Van Gogh, his kinsman in artistic bravery as well as through bloodlines but his opposite in objectives. 'Where natural emotion dominates plastic expression, a work of art always emphatically expresses the tragic. It expresses the tragic whenever it expresses sorrow or joy, as in the art of Van Gogh.'[1208]

It becomes clearer and clearer what Mondrian is determined to get away from. 'The natural, the visible in general, expresses the tragic to the extent that it has not been transformed (to universality) by the human spirit. The tragic in nature is manifest as corporeality—and that is expressed plastically as form and natural color, as roundness, naturalistic plastic, the curvilinear, and capriciousness and irregularity of surface.'[1209] By contrast, Mondrian danced only with his feet, his body straight; he avoided corporeality in life as in art. He sought antidotes to that tragic naturalness: manmade colors, straight lines, and extreme predetermination and calibration.

'Abolition of the tragic is the goal of life,'[1210] after all. And Mondrian comes again to the idea that underlies everything: 'If equilibrium and therefore unity are to exist in life, the spiritual must be manifest

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[1207] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 106. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 54.
[1208] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 106. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 54.
[1209] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 106. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 54.
[1210] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 107. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 55.

determinately and the natural must be interiorized so deeply that it reveals its pure essence.'[1211] Remember, the underlining is his. He was emphatic: to suppress his innate instincts was his only way to achieve the balance and spirituality that were one and the same.

If Freud considered repression the essence of neurosis, Mondrian deemed it the essence of sanity.

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Under the guise of speaking about painters in general, Mondrian furthers his self-portrait in his concluding paragraph. 'Every artist … compares each new work with a previous one in his own production or in that of others. He compares it with nature—as well as with other art. To make comparison is to exercise one's vision of relationships; and the artist is led to see and compare the basic oppositions: the individual and the universal.'[1212]

Here he leads us to a footnote that, although it whispers its message in six-point type, is the essence of his story: 'In life, too, the establishment of pure relationship (through pure, deepened, spiritual emotion: emotion-and-reason-in-one) is superior to involvement with (impure) emotion.'[1213]

Few people in the modern era believe emotion to be impure, or favor eschewing feelings rather than trying to understand them. But Piet Mondrian had, by the time he was middle-aged, consciously become like a monk or nun renouncing one form of existence in favor of another—so long as he could occasionally get to the dance hall or lunge at a woman for a kiss. He concludes his treatise: 'From a clearer and clearer perception of the relationship between this duality, a purer and purer mode of expression emerges. And so it is logical that the New Plastic arose.'[1214]

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If Michel Seuphor is at times responsible for some of the most pervasive misinformation about Mondrian, and often mythologized his friend, he is, contrarily, of the people who have written about Mondrian over the years, he is one of the few who successfully relates the writing to the man and the art. Having known Mondrian personally for many years, Seuphor, for all of his nonsense, sometimes provides tremendous insights.

After reprinting most of the first part of the essay "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" that appeared in the first issue of *De Stijl*, Seuphor gently suggests, 'It may be said with some justification that the text is somewhat abstruse.'[1215] And then he gives us a vital perspective on his hero: "In fact,

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[1211] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 126. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 58.
[1212] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, II(1918)2 p. 17-18. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 74.
[1213] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, aantekening 14 p. 19. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, note z p. 74.
[1214] Mondriaan, *Nieuwe Beelding*, p. 18. quoted from Holtzman, *Collected writings*, p. 74.
[1215] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144.

Mondrian was a man for whom speculation was as natural as breathing. To live for him meant to measure the absolute, to try to weigh the imponderable."

What Mondrian did during those long nights in Laren, in a time period when he was moving from one rented or lent room to another, when he did not know when he would get back to his modest new home in Paris, when he periodically wrote various friends that he was 'nearly finished' or 'almost at the end' with his book, only to say the same thing again, and then again, months later, as he repeated himself maniacally—always coming upon the idea he had expressed yesterday and the day before as if it had never before occurred to him, using a language few others could understand—was to try to discover some sort of universal truth.[1216] He was still searching for absolute knowledge with the same craving that had dominated his year of retreat when, on the evenings by the fire with Van den Briel in Brabant, he analyzed passages not just in the Christian Bible but in non-Western religious texts.

Seuphor declares 'relation to metaphysics' fundamental to 'all great painting.' He reminds us that 'Mondrian merely picked up the thread of the great tradition' of 'creating utopias' through art.[1217] That achievement was essential to Byzantine and Romanesque art, to Gothic sculpture and stained glass, to the paintings of Michelangelo, Rembrandt, and El Greco. It was, Seuphor writes, a matter of painting with the head as well as the brush, with 'the eyes of the mind' as well as 'eyes of flesh.'[1218]

Mondrian 'disavowed the conception of the painter's painter,' Seuphor explains. Difficult as his text is to understand, Mondrian wrote it in service of his goal 'to restore to honor the complete man, body and mind.' The result of those nights of writing and the days of refining his colors and lines was both a narrative and paintings which 'show once more that art is a mysterious domain.'[1219]

And then Seuphor, describing his own experience, encapsulates both Mondrian's intention and the artist's gift to the rest of us: 'When I look at a Neo-Plastic painting by Mondrian, my mind comes to a stop, I shed all everyday concerns, my thought calmly enters a new realm where everything

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[1216] ''t groote werk van de schrijverij is nu gedaan.' Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, February 22 1917, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 4; 'Ik ben zoo druk geweest dat ik den laatsten tijd mijn boek heb moeten laten rusten: 't is wel klaar en ik heb 't met van der Leck geheel doorgenomen hij gaf me nog verbeteringen aan de hand. Met Schoenmakers ben ik kwaad hij is toch de rechte broeder niet. […] Ik moet 't boek nu nog even na zien.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 16 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

[1217] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144.

[1218] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144.

[1219] All Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144.

is noble, true, self-evident.' Mondrian's work takes us to 'a marvelous, transcendent realm.'[1220]

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In the text over which he slaved, Mondrian struggled to analyze and program why that beatific transformation happens within the viewer. Seuphor, acknowledging that 'the absolute is better expressed in pure plasticism than words,' since words have varying meanings, and verbal language is always subject to interpretation, amplifies on why the full stop and then the delicious move into 'a new realm' occurs in front of the paintings if not in the artist's narrative about them. 'But red is red for everybody, and white is incontestably the opposite of black. [...] red is red, black is black, a right angle is an irreducible opposition of two movements, and four right angles joined together form a cross, which is the perfect equilibrium of various movements canceling each other.'

'It is precisely by means of a cross, which he represents asymmetrically, and by means of the dynamic equilibrium of this asymmetry, that the art of Mondrian conquers the absolute.'[1221] What Mondrian wrote in a period when he scarcely knew how or where he would manage to live, when day-to-day existence was precarious, was an effort to provide the world with a recipe for that conquest.

XXXIII

In October of 1917, Sal Slijper took up residence in Blaricum.[1222] When Slijper, who was becoming more and more of an adjunct to Mondrian, met Paul Sanders, a twenty-six-years-old composer and music critic, who was one of his new neighbors, he immediately realized this was someone to introduce to Mondrian. Mondrian had already come to connect his writing and painting to music through Van Domselaer; now he became preoccupied by the connection.

Sanders came from a successful banking family, and had been supposed to join the same business where all the men in his family had worked for generations. Instead, he opted for the far less lucrative profession of journalism, with his speciality being music since, had he chosen his real dream of being a composer, he would have earned no money whatsoever. He was intensely committed to leftist politics as well as music, and had become a leading voice of the SDAP, the Dutch Social Democratic Labor Party. Although Mondrian had disassociated himself from any political movement, its views remained dear to his heart, and Slijper was right to recognize that the younger man's shared political stance, along with his

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[1220] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144.
[1221] All Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 144-149.
[1222] Prins, *Slijper*, p. 150.

courage in going his own way with a life devoted to music rather than banking, would appeal to Mondrian.

Besides, Sanders had the sort of wordly charm and kind, agreeable manner Mondrian liked. Clean-shaven, impeccably groomed with his thick wavy hair brushed back off his high forehead, elegant in his wide-lapelled double-breasted pinstripe suits, Sanders was one of those people whose company appealed to Mondrian, and made his everyday life more pleasant. This was one of the rare friendships that would endure. Eventually, as a music critic for the Dutch socialist newspaper *Het Volk*, Sanders would spend a lot of time in Paris, and he would become a loyal and helpful devotee to the struggling artist, twenty years his senior, whose work he adored and whom he found sympathetic in the relative helplessness that was a relief in comparison to the greed of many of the other people Sanders knew.

One evening, shortly after Mondrian and Paul Sanders had met for the first time, and they were 'chatting over a cup of coffee'—the memories are in Sanders's words—'Piet suggested that we take a little walk. Slijper preferred to stay home, and a little walk turned into an expedition of several hours.'[1223]

Mondrian and Sanders headed off on the Torenlaan, the road that linked Blaricum and Laren. The tram rails ran alongside it, and the former dirt road had been paved seven years earlier, but it was devoid of traffic, entirely quiet, bordered by trees and away from civilization except for the occasional farmhouse with light coming through a couple of windows on the otherwise pitch-dark landscape. Mondrian, although he had proposed the outing, said nothing whatsoever, and after they had gone perhaps a quarter of a mile, they turned back toward Blaricum, at Mondrian's lead but still wordless. Sanders, being nineteen years younger than Mondrian, felt it was not his place to break the silence and disturb the painter's thought process. Sanders longed to ask this man for whom he had such ardent respect what he thought of some of the pioneering modern painting he had seen in Berlin before the outbreak of war, but he restrained himself.

Then Mondrian suddenly started to talk. He turned to Sanders and asked what he thought of the music of Jakob van Domselaer. He said nothing more; he simply asked the question, in as few words as possible.

Sanders knew that Van Domselaer's work was popular with painters. He and his fellow composers, however, liked it less. Sanders himself considered Van Domselaer's music 'rather monotonous and bogged down in only partially successful experiments.'[1224] But he wanted to be tactful. Rather than say this flat out, he told Mondrian he greatly preferred Schoenberg.

[1223] Paul F. Sanders, 'Herinneringen aan Piet Mondriaan', in: *Maatstaf* 27(1979)12, p. 1.
[1224] Sanders, *Herinneringen*, p. 2.

What Sanders said made little difference, however, since Mondrian was clearly not paying attention. Instead of discussing music, 'he started talking about the influences that had affected his technique and style' and about his belief that abstraction was more meaningful than naturalism. 'He went deeper into the analogies and the differences between the application of that concept on the visual arts and music.'[1225] The question had only been a conversional gambit; Sanders's views on Van Domselaer, which Sanders had struggled to handle with such delicacy, did not concern him in the least. Mondrian was off and running on the subject of his passion. Again he shifted direction on the country road, now in the direction of Laren. By the time they got back to Blaricum three hours later, they had shifted course more times than Sanders could count, Mondrian holding forth without stop and with an intensity that ruled out all other thoughts.

XXXIV

Most of the people he knew in Laren accepted Mondrian's unusual social affect as integral to his genius and originality. Sal Slijper's wife would later tell Michel Seuphor: 'There were often many people at the farm on Sundays. Young people especially. Piet enjoyed dancing with a pretty girl, but he never mixed for long with the crowd. He would disappear, and I would always find him in my back kitchen, far from the noise, sitting calmly in a corner. He generally came for lunch, and on Sundays always brought a little something, a drawing or a sketch, as a gift.'[1226]

By the end of 1917, with Schoenmaekers having fallen out of favor and the Van Domselaers having married and moved, the nightly dinners around the table at Catharina Hannaert's came to an end. Mondrian and some of the other De Stijl artists simply changed venue, having the good fortune to be able to repair to Van der Leck's home in the evenings, regardless of Mondrian's having chastised their host for keeping the donkeys visible. Mondrian would stick to the sidelines and remain reticent as was usual for him in social situations, until he began to proffer his theories non-stop, also part of his routine. He had no apparent awareness of how this was for other people on those evenings in a friend's home. It was the same as when they all went off to his beloved Hamdorff and he danced like an automaton; he did not think to alter his comportment.

But he knew himself well. Mondrian allowed to Slijper: 'On the surface, I lack spirit, but, as you pointed out, I have inner spirit. […] As you know, I have had to go through some hard trials, and not a few of them—rather no, you don't know much about it—but I have always emerged laughing

[1225] Sanders, *Herinneringen*, p. 2.
[1226] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 129.

inwardly. That is why the most bitter disappointment could never make me unhappy, despite everything.'[1227]

Mondrian was totally conscious of the reasons for what seemed to be his unconscious behavior, as knowingly determined as the resolute abstraction of his painting.

XXXV

In January 1918, Schoenmaekers published a lecture called 'Art and Thought' in the periodical *Het Getij*.[1228] Mondrian believed that his former friend had crossed the boundary of common sense forever with this 'scandalous' text. Schoenmaekers claimed that 'art is nothing more than individual feeling.'[1229] This was the antithesis of everything Mondrian believed in.

Mondrian wrote Van Doesburg very clearly about this contradiction of the values he deemed the essence of all worthy artistic endeavor. He insisted that Van Doesburg completely cease all contact with Schoenmaekers.[1230] It was no longer sufficient that Mondrian himself had broken communication with the mathematician/philosopher he had, only a year earlier, prized as a dear colleague. No one true to *De Stijl* could continue to engage with Schoenmaekers.

Schoenmaekers's elaboration of his views facilitates our understanding of Mondrian's deepest beliefs by so perfectly contradicting them. While saying that an artist must make manifest his own feelings, Schoenmaekers declared the feelings induced in others by art to be irrelevant. He did not believe, as did Mondrian, that the underlying geometrical order in the universe and the metaphysical meanings of the three primary colors could play a role in painting; Schoenmaekers saw those absolutes as being completely irrelevant, whereas Mondrian saw them as essential. Schoenmaekers insisted that straight lines and the qualities of undiluted red, yellow, and blue were antithetical to emotion; Mondrian, contrarily, considered them the source of deep feeling. Mondrian ranted. 'As if

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[1227] Letter Mondrian to Slijper, quoted from Seuphor, Mondrian, p. 132.

[1228] M.H.J. Schoenmaekers, 'Kunst en gedachte', in: *Het Getij: maandschrift voor jongeren* 3(1918), p. 4-11.

[1229] 'Gisteren had ik de lezing van Schoenm. pas gelezen. Nu ik er over nagedacht heb, vind ik zijn kunstidee schandelijk. Alsof kunst niet meer is dan individueele aandoening.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [c. february 1918], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

[1230] 'mij dunkt dat je wel goed doet met Schoenmakers te schrijven dat je na lezen van zijn lezing "kunst en gedachte" ziet dat hij niet bij ons hoort en dus je verzoek om mee te werken intrekt.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [c. february 1918], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134.

emotion has nothing to do with it, even if there is not an artistic thought involved,' he wrote Van Doesburg.[1231]

Mondrian still recognized and admired 'his intelligence, but he remains cold.'[1232] For Mondrian, there was no worse crime. Mondrian's own avoidance of nature as the subject matter of his art, his quest for reason, his forms of self-denial never for a moment meant that he turned his back on the intoxicating qualities of beauty. As the war in Europe intensified, and uncertainty affected absolutely everyone, Piet Mondrian wanted, more and more, to celebrate what is lasting and unwaveringly sublime.

XXXVI

By the end of 1917, Helene Kröller-Müller had become Mondrian's dream client. She listened to Bremmer, and Bremmer kept her aware of each forward step in Mondrian's work. Although she was less excited by the newest paintings, she had developed a fondness for his earlier paintings.[1233] Putting money in the bank, essential while he kept paying for his unused studio in Paris and covering his costs, however reduced, in Laren.

Supporters like Kröller-Müller and Bremmer made Mondrian all the more confident that he and the fellow Dutch artists he was happy to have as colleagues were on the right path. In the second issue of *De Stijl*, Gino Severini had written an article extolling the merits of French avant-garde painting. Mondrian wrote Van Doesburg saying that 'our Parisian colleagues […] are going in the wrong direction. […] we are further along.'[1234] Severini pointed out that the French wanted to capture objects and the body, which only hardened the resolve of Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Van der Leck, and others associated with *De Stijl* to push their agenda that to remain connected to naturalism was to lag behind. 'We want only to portray what these objects express – relationship. Let them call it too abstract, and let them do what they want. I already felt a difference in Paris, and that is why I avoided even Picasso.'[1235]

Mondrian was in one of his moments of confidence. They came and went, but at times like these when he was feeling upbeat, he saw all life ebulliently. He believed that his latest compositions were evidence that at last he was making strides with his own work. 'I'm getting more unity in my

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[1231] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [c. february 1918], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 113.
[1232] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 134.
[1233] Rovers, *De eeuwigheid verzameld*, p. 297-298.
[1234] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [December 1917], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 112.
[1235] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [December 1917], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 112.

things, and the balance I am looking for.'[1236] He focused completely on realizing those qualities in further compositions. The war, and all that was beyond his control, only made him push himself harder to achieve equilibrium and wholeness by creating them on canvas.

Especially since he could not avoid changing residences and then landlords, he was delighted his art provided stability and inner comfort. Mondrian had moved to the Pijlsteeg in Laren where he rented two rooms in a house that was subleased first to Marie Calisch and then to Jo Steijling.

Almost as soon as she met the man she inherited as a tenant of the house she rented in order to run it as a rooming house, Jo Steijling became one of those women who adored Mondrian. They cropped up periodically. Mondrian was what most people would have considered "an acquired taste," but when women fell for him, they fell hard. He resisted her advances—he deliberately avoided romantic entanglement in order to concentrate on his art—but she did not let go easily.

Seven years younger than Mondrian, Steijling had lived in an orphanage as a child. By profession she was a nursemaid, and she was a dedicated Theosophist. She would live until 1973, and late in her life, although she would remain silent about her and Mondrian's personal relationship, she would become a valuable source on the artist she adored. It is from Steijling that we have a vivid description of Mondrian working on the 1917 Compositions. Painting the blue, yellow, and pink squares against a white background, Mondrian was 'sometimes suddenly restless and grumbling.'[1237] Unhappiness would overcome him unexpectedly; something that struck him as wrong in a measurement would put him into a state of despair. The battle would torment him. At first, he would simply pace anxiously around his studio. Then he would change the color of a single form. But he was rarely satisfied with his solution. Rather than feel he had resolved what he had considered a problem, he became convinced that he had destroyed the hard-won balance he had previously achieved. Color, after all, had weight. Having altered a hue for reasons having to do with a harmony derived from the placement and quantity of each pigment, he subsequently felt that he had sacrified the spatial rhythm and unity he considered imperative.

The setbacks would at times leave Mondrian so discouraged that he was no longer able to work. He needed time before he could take the next step. He could not even contemplate trying to regain what he had lost, and he was angry at himself for the way he had messed things up while remedying a minor shortcoming. Steijling often observed him stopping work completely.

While Mondrian's doting landlady was a fetching woman who admired his artistic intensity and sympathized with his struggles, he instinctively kept

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[1236] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, December 12 1917, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 134. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 113.
[1237] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 216.

his distance from her. She only became more enchanted with him. Either in spite of her increasinly visible adoration, or because of it, he recoiled.

Steijling would not be put off. What began in 1917 in Laren would play out subsequently. After Mondrian moved back to Paris in 1919, Steijling would try to follow him there. Mondrian discouraged her, writing Van Doesburg, 'For all her good intentions, she is very arrogant, not sincere either [...] I have now written to her in plain terms that I don't want to see her any more.'[1238]

Nonetheless, in May 1922, Mondrian reported, 'Jo Steijling was in Paris for a week, after which I got back to work.'[1239] We only know what we know, but to take a week off from making art was exceptional for Mondrian. The hiatus suggests a lot. And later in 1922, in spite of his previous resolve to avoid Steijling, Mondrian would readily accept her help. It was at a time when Mondrian became so discouraged because of his financial problems that he wrote Van Doesburg that he was thinking of moving to Southern France and taking a job picking olives. Jo Steijling, Slijper, and Peter Alma got together to create a fund to which they asked Mondrian's friends to contribute. In honor of his fiftieth birthday, they bought a painting for which the payment covered his rent for an entire year. It was a godsend, and with that acquisition she helped engineer, Mondrian's former landlady managed to make herself indispensable. Whether or not she did so mainly out of self-interest—Mondrian himself, after all, was the one to label her 'not sincere'—his circumstances were so desperate that, even though he was back in France during peacetime and a period of economic recovery, he had no choice but to accept her help.

XXXVII

At the easel and on the dance floor, Mondrian was increasingly confident that he was taking the right steps. By the start of 1918, he began encasing the rectangular planes of color that he had developed in the compositions of the earlier year, where they floated untended, with bold black lines of equal width. That grid gave the paintings a new syncopation.

With no sign of world peace or of his imminent return to Paris that spring, he also put new energy into mastering more than one dance step at the Hamdorff. He requested the orchestra to play music for the "one-step"—a fast ballroom dance that had become increasingly popular in the last decade. It was a highly precise and demanding series of movements. The one-step had to be executed to music in exact 2/4 or 6/8 time, with about sixty bars a minute. Mondrian was equally eager to hone his skill in the two-step, a modern derivative of the Polka. For this, one of the dancing

[1238] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, June 12 1920, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136.
[1239] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, May 25 1922, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 139.

partners moves forward, the other backwards, each taking a step in the same direction on the same foot, and then making a closing step with the other foot, either perpendicularly—at ninety degrees—or at an oblique angle. Those movements are followed by another step with the first foot in the same direction as the initial move, after which the dancing partners can do either a right or a left two-step, in tandem, completing the sequence in the positions in which they started.

Mondrian met his objectives on the dance floor of the Hamdorff ballroom, the place to which he repaired faithfully once a week in the season. He became competent at both the one-step and the two-step, at least according to his standards, even if his partners and onlookers considered him stiff and ill-at-ease. He then decided to try moves that were even more complicated than these demanding steps, and learn the boston and the tango.

As always, Mondrian embraced the new challenge. When his task came from within, by choice, he performed it enthusiastically. In his painting as in his dancing, he adhered to a set of rules and imposed a discipline on himself which would lend new grace to the art. In painting, the guidelines were of his own invention, every bit as strict as the requisites of the tango, but in this case developed by him alone. Now he introduced a grid of gray lines into his work.

The pallor of the gray posed unprecedented issues to be resolved. Moreover, Mondrian knew the lighter tone would make the paintings almost impossible to sell. But the self-imposed hardships only added to Mondrian's sense that he was on the right course. After completing *Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines 1*, *2*, and *3*, Mondrian felt they were the best work he had done to date.[1240]

Neither Van Doesburg nor most of his other colleagues agreed. Their opinions did not bother him—Mondrian had no question that he was going in the right direction—but he recognized the consequences of the lack of appeal of these more subtle new paintings. Nobody other than Bremmer would possibly buy them, so he considered not put them up for sale to anyone else, and if Bremmer, too, resisted, he would somehow find another way to make ends meet.[1241]

He wrote Van Doesburg defensively: 'It is true, with a regular division there is a risk of repeating oneself, but that can be countered by contrasting.

[1240] B92 *Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines 1*, 1918, Private collection; B93 *Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines 2,* 1918, Lost by fire; B94 *Composition with Color Planes and Gray Lines 3*, 1918, Lost by fire.

[1241] 'Nu dacht ik de dingen maar niet te koop te zetten. […] Ik denk dat niemand anders koopen zal en heb 't meeste idee dat U ze ook wel wilt hebben.' Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, February 27 1918, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 19.

Everything can become a system, both the regular and the irregular division. It only depends on how it is solved.'[1242]

Whenever other people, even the so-called cognoscenti, questioned his latest independent step forward, or openly disparaged it, Mondrian inevitably responded this way. He never showed the slightest hint of discouragement. Rather, he calmly explained what he was doing. If his carefully considered and premiditated responses to the critiques were not well-received, so be it.

Mondrian refused to be flapped by rejection. He could never allow himself just to keep doing what had already succeeded. Art was always a progression, and the new had to be better than the old.

XXXVIII

Then Mondrian made a further leap when he developed a series of paintings he entitled *Composition with Grid*. Each has a regular and meticulous grid as graph paper. They have, without exception, sixteen modules across and sixteen up and down, the modules having the precise shape and proportions as the canvas itself. The coloring of the modules causes larger planes to arise, their pattern irregular, but the underlying system remains evident. The unwavering structure is the basis for continuous movement and playfulness. Working at a fever pitch, Mondrian became determined to complete a dozen related compositions so that they would be ready for the Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring's fifth annual exhibition.[1243]

By the end of February, however, Mondrian accepted the reality of his inability to complete paintings quickly. To assure that each could be a total success, he re-established his goal as eight. He thought in easily divisible numbers, and had reduced the total by a precise third.

In so doing, Mondrian acknowledged his debt to a different artist. He credited his conversations with the artist Vilmos Huszár, about the use of 'a regular subdivision'[1244] for his new formats. Huszár, like Van der Leck, retained elements of traditional subject matter in the work, always a shortcoming in Mondrian's eyes, but even as he reworked the mathematically regular grid in a more radical way, as the basis of abstractions that referred to nothing but themselves, he would not forget Huszár's gift.

[1242] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, April 18 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 266.

[1243] 'Nu ben ik aan een twaalftal bezig […] ik zal wel een paar kleine doeken eind Februari in A'dam weer exposeeren.' Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, January 6 1919, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 6. The fifth annual exhibition of the Hollandsche Kunstenaarskring was from February 22 until March 23, 1919. Joosten & Welsh, *CR III*, p. 29.

[1244] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, June 13 1918, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 135. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 267.

Vilmos Huszár had been born in Budapest, Hungary in 1884. In 1906, he had moved to The Hague, and in 1916, he had met Van Doesburg. He designed the covers of the first issues of *De Stijl* magazine. He was a new player in the movement that helped realized many of Mondrian's most sacred ideas. Although he breaks with Van Doesburg in 1924, he remained faithful to the principles of *De Stijl*.[1245]

Discussing his response to outside influence, Mondrian wrote Van Assendelft, 'I am constantly changing—without wanting to.'[1246] The compositions themselves had some of the same restless motion that governed the man who had made them. They suggest his unwillingness ever to stop, to sit still with his art. None of the new works have either repeats or simple formulas. There is inevitably another step to take, a different unexpected move.

When Wassily Kandinsky declared, 'There is always an *and*,' he was voicing much the same will to keep moving, to avoid the static and enliven the pulse of his work.[1247] Like Mondrian, Kandinsky was exiled at this time back in his homeland (Russia) having been forced to leave the place to which he had moved to make art (Munich). Abstraction, brilliantly colored, referring to nothing but itself, provided, for him as well, a chance to create a universe that is endlessly alive. Unrelated to the difficult realities they faced each day, the art these two pioneering painters made, had in common that it provided a spectacular alternative to the tragic aspects of existence. Breathing and pulsing with life, Mondrian's and Kandinsky's abstract compositions, even if the first were geometric and the second organic, offered complete diversion, and refreshment, to artist and viewer alike.

#

Finances were now tighter than ever for most everyone in Europe, even someone of Bremmer's relative fortune. Mondrian, too, was in tough straits, although in his case the lack of money was more familiar. He had had no time to make copies or portraits while working on the new series, making his cash flow so bad that on February 27, he wrote Bremmer asking if he could have his March allowance in advance.[1248] Bremmer, in spite of his own difficulties, responded by doubling Mondrian's allowance. In order to do so, however, Bremmer had to pre-sell most of the eight new compositions to the few people who had cash in that difficult time. He would have liked to hold on to more for his own collection, but could not afford the option.

In this period when he was developing the series of grid paintings and begging for cash, Mondrian received a letter from Van Doesburg that put

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[1245] See for instance Sjarel Ex and Els Hoek, *Vilmos Huszár, schilder en ontwerper, 1884-1960. De grote onbekende van De Stijl*, Reflex, Utrecht 1985.
[1246] Letter Mondrian to Van Assendelft, January 6 1919, RKD #0154 inv.nr. 6. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 267.
[1247] Weber, *Bauhaus*, p. 207.
[1248] Letter Mondrian to Bremmer, February 27 1918, RKD #0836, inv.nr. 2.

him even more on the defensive about the previous phase of his art, when he had replaced black with gray. Mondrian did not save letters, so we don't know exactly what Van Doesburg wrote to him, but we do know how he justified himself in his response, which fortunately was preserved by Nelly van Doesburg. Under attack, Mondrian asserted his own worth. He defended the three paintings with gray as 'a development' and continued 'I don't agree that gray, sharp planes would cause a tone.' He acknowledged certain 'shortcomings' in these canvases, but added, 'I found each piece in itself quite good. The large one I, too, liked best. I will continue in that vein. The lines are not cut off, really; they only seem to. Perhaps it is a technical flaw, if I made that impression.'[1249] He went out of his way to be reasonable, yet would not budge an inch.

#

These issues revolving around their artistic approaches made or broke friendships among the *De Stijl* artists. In 1916, after Van der Leck had moved to Laren, where he lived a five-minute walk from Mondrian, the two painters had begun seeing each other almost every day. Those daily encounters continued throughout 1917. Each happily acknowledged the effect of the other. Van der Leck was designing posters for Helene Kröller-Müller's husband's company, making stained glass for some of the same far-sighted collectors who patronized Mondrian, and advising on the interior of their homes. Mondrian admired all of it.

Then, when Mondrian began to use his bold black and gray lines around color and eliminate background, Van der Leck complained to others in the "group" that Mondrian was on the wrong track. Mondrian, meanwhile, faulted the way Van der Leck kept working against white background. Then they began to fight, not just over the role of whiteness, but also over the use of diagonals, which Van der Leck endorsed. 'Mondrian never let go of the cross,' he observed to their mutual friends.[1250]

Van der Leck's meaning was clear: that the so-called painter of the universal would always remain a Calvinist at heart. Mondrian got wind of it, and was furious. He would write Van Doesburg that Van der Leck was "small, narrow, and false."[1251] He had been able to endure their differences of theory, but Van den Leck's sniper behind Mondrian's back destroyed the friendship.

When the *De Stijl* manifesto was ready to be published in November 1918, Van der Leck refused to sign it.[1252]

[1249] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, April 9 1918, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 135. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 113.
[1250] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 225.
[1251] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, June 12 1920, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 137.
[1252] Cees Hilhorst, 'Bart van der Leck', in: Blotkamp, *De Stijl. The formative years 1917-1922*, The MIT Press, Camebridge MA - London 1986, p. 179.

Mondrian, as part of a group, had subjected himself to just the sort of controversy that had destroyed his father. Philosophical or aesthetic debates mattered more than personal attachments to both men. But the son handled it differently than his father did. Pieter Mondriaan had fought for beliefs that failed to be as popular as those of his opposition, and gone from defeat to bitterness. Mondrian just kept painting exactly as he wanted, confident of his course and indifferent to the voices of opposition. If others opted for different methods than he did, he avoided them, but always found a means to focus on work rather than lose the time consumed by feuds. Still, he expected decent behavior.

XXXIX

Once he was completing the series of paintings with their perfect grids sixteen units in height and width, Mondrian wrote Van Doesburg, who he knew would see them in Amsterdam, that he should consider certain vital factors.

'You must keep in mind that my things should be seen as paintings, that is to say, they are an expression in and by themselves, not part of a building. And that they were made in a small room. And that I use subdued colors temporarily, adjusting myself to the present environment and world: it does not prevent me from preferring a pure color. Otherwise you might think I contradicted myself in my work.'[1253]

Mondrian was not as indifferent to the realities of the war as he liked to appear. No wonder that the letters from an anonymous, life-loving, stoic soldier on the front lines meant so much to him. What he allowed to Van Doesburg made clear that while Mondrian might live in tough circumstances with a certain resignation—and not just to survive, but flourish, by assiduously forbidding himself to moan or complain about the war's impact either on him or anyone else—current hardships were directly impacting the tone of his art. The pigments he would have preferred were either unavailable or prohibitively expensive.

Mondrian had accepted those privations and found a different palette rather than be defeated by them. Lifelong, his way of dealing with limitations—material, physical, personal—was to acknowledge them, rather than deny their reality, and find solutions. Like that soldier on the front, he would always discover the means to celebrate the beauty that nothing can violate.

[1253] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, February 13 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 267.

XL

The restrictions imposed by the paucity of available paints required a suitable response. Mondrian had to figure out a form of composition whereby he could still achieve, or exceed, the pulse and rhythm of the work he had made when the means were less limited. His solution was not, as one would have expected, to beef up the linear elements he could still expand at will with the black paint he had no trouble procuring. It was to go leaner than ever before.

The possibilities of what he could do having decreased, Mondrian decided to limit himself even more, managing to gyrate like an acrobat while standing only on a single toe. This was the moment we have already observed: he tilted the vastly larger square of canvas forty-five degrees for his first diamond composition. Simpler than anything he had even painted before, it has astonishing action. The painting was not just a retreat from color as artists have deliberately done for a long time. The will of painters to confine themselves to blacks, whites, and grays is an exercise with history, it produced some wonderful results like Mantegna's wonderful grisaille paintings.

But Mondrian not only opted for a monochrome palette. He made gray and white only. In *Composition with Grid III: Lozenge Composition,* which he completed in 1918, reducing his palette to nothing but two unmodulated dark grays and a single white, and using nothing but a few straight lines, enriching their effect by the audacious rotating of the canvas forty-five degrees, he miraculously made color and motion occur in profusion when all that he had painted was in actual fact colorless and still.[1254]

With its austere vocabulary of both form and hue, *Composition with Grid III* also produces light. The painting consisting of nothing but perfectly straight lines on a white background, is radiant. Everything is at even intervals; the distances between the lines that cross the canvas are always of exactly the same measure, an astonishing concept. Exceptionally, Mondrian has used diagonal lines—meticulously making them all the identical width. The only variation he allows himself is with the widths of the horizontals and verticals that bifurcate the large canvas, of which each side measures nearly three feet. Those two different thicknesses and the clusters formed by the intersections of the lines going in three different directions create the shimmer and sparkle of the sort of diamond that comes from mines and has been carefully cut by a brilliant jeweler to achieve maximum brilliance. The luminosity of the white adds to the state of perpetual movement. Looking at it is like looking at a star-filled sky on the clearest of nights: equally forceful and timeless.

[1254] B97 *Composition with Grid 3: Lozenge Composition*, 1918, oil on canvas, diagonal: 121 cm; sides: 84,5 x 84,5 cm, Gemeentemuseum.

Mondrian had searched and experimented for many weeks to find the precise white paint for the field of *Composition with Grid III*. Then he applied the dark gray grid with its magical energy. Having finished his work, he then became ill.[1255]

When he revived and rose from his sick bed a couple of weeks after succumbing to one of his nasty bouts of flu, Mondrian studied this most important of his new creations. The white no longer looked right to him. He felt he had to change it completely, and did so, demanding as the task was never to perturb any of the gray edges. He never used anything than the brush he held in his hand to achieve his meticulous borders, but it was a labor of love. The new results thrilled him, and he believed that his forced time away because of his illness, and the subsequent change he felt impelled to make when he saw the canvas in a fresh way, were a gift of the gods.

The only issue was that the paint was drying slowly. Mondrian needed to have *Composition with Grid III* ready for an upcoming exhibition, and was concerned that it would still be tacky. In order to have it completely dry by the delivery date, he put it near his wood burning stove.

When he looked on the following day, the white areas had begun to blister, with the flat paint developing a series of fissures. In the course of a single day, the cracks widened. Mondrian could accept imperfections, but this was too much. He had to remove all the whites and repaint them entirely.

He would, lifelong, be secretive about his technical processes and keep them unknown even to his fellow painters. With modern technology, however, it has recently been deduced that he started with a layer of lead white, and then applied zinc white or permanent white on top of it, each layer thinner than the one below. Those were his materials until about 1930; in the 30s and 40s, he would use titanium for the top layer. Those choices of materials were vital, as was the method of application. The exact tone of the white was fundamental to the snowy purity of the work, its luminescence and glow.

To have to do the canvas a third time would have been too dauting a task for almost anyone else. But Mondrian not only undertook the effort; he did so, as always, in such a way that no one could see or imagine what went into the result. Only the end product mattered.

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On first impression, *Composition with Grid III* strikes the viewer as a straightforward open-weave, composed essentially of the same elements as a fishing net. Then, as one observes it more closely, the subtleties begin to reveal themselves. One soon realizes the complexity of all that Mondrian organized to bring what is apparently so simple to life. While keeping the

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[1255] In many letters to Van Doesburg and Slijper, from September 1918 until January 1919, Mondrian mentions having the Spanish flu. See RKD #0408 inv.nr. 135 & 136; RKD #0150 inv.nr. 189.

diagonals of consistent width and planning and executing the vertical and horizontal grays in four different widths in all rather than a single one as initially seemed to be the case, he achieved a feat of deception.

There are few visitors to the Gemeente Museum in The Hague, where this popular masterpiece by Mondrian hangs, who do not initially think that all the lines are the same width and color of gray, on a background compound with a single white. The mind wants order, and imagines concision. Few museum-goers bother to stay long enough in front of this work which seems to declare "I am what I am," and nothing more, to recognize the subtleties. They are losing out, though, if they rush on. Were they to stay the difference between one's initial expectation of what is there, and the actuality, induces a great surprise.

It isn't just that the facts are not as one first thought. The vibration of the painting, the way it bursts like a flower at the moment of maximum blossoming, the up-down, left-right, inward-outward movement, at the tempo of one of those two-steps Mondrian was mastering at the Hamdorff, is astonishing.

Without tape, using only his hand, yet initially giving the impression of machined precision, Mondrian has breathed life onto the canvas. The junctions all sparkle. The interaction is exuberant.

Eventually the viewer deduces that, as with the warp and weft of weaving, some of the lines are on top of, or beneath, others. Generally the thicker ones appear nearer to us, covering the thinner ones. But there is no formula. Rather, this is like life itself: with a pulse, with ongoing motion, with systems and reasons but also with anomalies and full of unpredictable events.

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When we look at *Composition with Grid III* today, it is displayed as a museum masterpiece. Secure and well-lit, protected as an icon, known through its reproduction in scores of publications, it reveals nothing of the conditions under which Mondrian painted it. The average viewer would never imagine the author of this upbeat, bold, confident gem as working in a small, borrowed space in a quiet village, removed from the metropolis in which he really wanted to be living, waiting out a war that was as its peak, reading the deeply moving letters of a soldier victimized by that war, not knowing himself how he would pay the next coal bill, struggling to cover the rent for the Paris apartment to which he could not gain access. He was also coping with symptoms of Spanish flu, and of miserable dental pain because of the faulty crown put in three years earlier and that resulted in the abscess which peridodically got the better of him.

This is who Mondrian was: the autonomous captain of his own small ship who spent his days measuring and remeasuring, calculating, executing his decision, modifying proportions and hues as if to have the glistening white sails of his craft as taut as possible, completely flat and unfurled off of its flawlessly engineered, rigid vertical mast, utilizing every breath of wind

to the fullest, moving swiftly over the miracle of water under the miracle of sky. Rather than revealing an iota of his own daily issues, he provided a glorious solution. He treated the vicissitudes of his existence not as suffering, but as reality with which one must cope as best as one can in order not just to survive but to continue to profit from life's beauty and add to it. Like the soldier, Mondrian believed that life was to be celebrated under any circumstances.

#

One night in August of 1918, the painters Co Breman and Evert Pieters and the architect Herman Walenkamp transformed the Hamdorff into a Pompeian court. Those who attended walked around in Roman sandals. They dressed in tunics and callas with wreathes of flowers in their hair, and did 'faun-like dances.'[1256]

Standing tip-toe on one foot, shimmering white, moving non-stop, elegant and playful, *Composition with Grid III* had the same festive spirit as that evening when Mondrian danced until dawn.

He was on one of his upswings. The taciturn painter, practically phlegmatic in effect, now age forty-six, was moving forward in his art with audacity. Presenting himself not just to the world but to himself as if he were, perhaps, an educated shipping clerk, he had unequaled courage and originality in his art. His lengthy letters full of details about which painting was going where, how to frame them, and issues like the amount of money required for a second-hand jacket, have none of the élan with which he painted. He lived with this order so that he could better break new ground in his art. His bold, completely unprecedented way of painting was not a matter of defiance: of tradition of anyone else's rules. If he was a rebel, rebellion was not his goal. He was possessed of a powerful rationalism which facilated the complete lack of inhibition.

Of the grid of lines he balanced on a corner point, he had, when working on it, written Van Doesburg that he was testing to see if this approach was possible. "It has something to say for it, because the standing and the lying occur everywhere in nature; I would neutralize it by diagonals."[1257] With that will toward fairness, that wish to honor nature but also enhance it, he had made a canvas which gave the world something that had never existed before.

XLI

Britain had entered the war taking place on continental soil on August 4, 1914, America on April 6, 1917. About a year and a half later, on October

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[1256] Heyting, *De wereld in een dorp*, p. 181.

[1257] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, undated [April 1918], RKD #0408 inv.nr. 135. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 268.

17, 1918, the French, British, and American armies united in an all-out offensive against their mutual enemies. The Central Powers began to flounder. Turkey signed an armistice first on October 30 and Austria-Hungary following shortly thereafter, on November 3, 1918.

Under attack, Germany began to fall apart from within. The sailors of its High Seas Fleet mutinied, and revolution started to spread. On November 9, Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated his throne and slipped over the German border from the Belgium resort town of Spa into southern Netherlands. Two days later, at 5 am, the leaders of the new German Republic signed an armistice in a railway car functioning as a makeshift office in French forest near the front lines. An hour later, Marshal Foch announced the end of hostilities on the radio; the fighting stopped along the Western Front at 11 am.: It was the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. By the end of that day, people all over the world were drinking champagne and dancing in the streets.

Queen Wilhelmina refused to extradite Wilhelm, the last Hohenzollern monarch, for prosecution. He would remain in the Netherlands until his death during its occupation by Germany in 1941, after turning down Winston Churchill's invitation that he join his gracious hostess and flee with Wilhelmina to Britain.

The conflict that had engulfed Europe from 1914 to 18 had been the worst in human history. In just over four years, over nine millions soldiers had been killed and twenty-one million wounded with five million civilians dying from disease or starvation relating to "the war to end all wars."

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The internecine battles of the De Stijl group were intensifying at the same time that World War I came to an end. Like most movements working toward a common goal, De Stijl was fraught with disagreement. Mondrian did his best to stay on the sidelines in the disputes that were overshadowing the possible accomplishments. Still, he was among those members opposed to the inclusion of architects on equal footing with painters. He insisted on the primacy of painting, and had assiduously avoided writing about architecture in his text that was being published serially in each issue of *De Stijl*'s eponymous magazine. When, in November of 1918, he was one of the seven co-signatories of the "De Stijl Manifesto," the supremacy he accorded his own art form caused considerable opposition. But his beliefs were inalterable, and rather than make enemies, he preferred to withdraw from organizational politics.

His life had become difficult enough by the end of 1918. Again he had to take portrait and copy commissions to make money. Mondrian called these pieces "pot boilers."[1258] He was resigned to the necessity of doing what he could to survive, but regretted having to slow down his own work. His energies were further depleted by repeated bouts of Spanish flu that

[1258] Joosten, *CR II*, p. 114.

autumn; and every time he was confident he had shaken it, he became ill again. Nothing was going his way; in spite of the armistice, Europe was still in a shambles, and the direct impact of the new peace on Mondrian's living situation remained unclear.

Still, the paintings Mondrian managed to produce when he could eke out some time and wasn't feeling too sick manifest a sheer joy and an ambient peacefulness. The horizontal/vertical divisions provided a sense of resolution. Those qualities could be equally powerful on building façades, but there was something more to Mondrian's constructions, which is one of the reasons Mondrian was so insistent on the distinction between painting and architecture. Each of its canvases has its own integrity, a relationship of the parts and a complex balance that did not extend beyond its borders. The totality and completeness of the composition was part of what made the work salubrious; so was its lack of utility. This was creativity for the sake of no other purpose than the joy of its onlooker.

Mondrian was increasingly determined that that quality be understood. On February 13, 1919, he wrote Van Doesburg, 'You must keep in mind that my things should still be seen as paintings, that is to say, they are an expression in and by themselves, not part of a building.'[1259] He pointed out that he made them in a small room. He stood his ground about their independence from an architectural setting. In that year when the Bauhaus was being born, when all the visual arts were being regarded as part of an overall scheme, the primacy of painting was increasingly essential to him. It was one of the reasons he was so eager to return to Paris, for centuries the home base of traditional picture makers.

XLII

In April of 1919, Mondrian informed Van Doesburg that he was 'now working on something which is a reconstruction of a starry sky, yet I make it without a natural subject. Thus, whoever says he is starting from a natural subject may be right, and so is he who says he is starting from scratch! I just want to prove how dangerous it is to have a system.'[1260] Pushing forward, determined to avoid formulas or traps, he was relishing a sense of personal liberation. In January of 1919, a peace conference had begun in Paris with the French Premier, Georges Clemenceau; the American President, Woodrow Wilson; the British Prime Minister, David Lloyd George; and the Italian Minister President, Victoria Orlando comprising the Council of Four making the decisions. On May 7, the new German government was

[1259] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, February 13 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR* II, p. 114.
[1260] Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, April 18 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136. Translation quoted from Joosten, *CR* II, p. 115.

informed of the terms the four leaders had put into the treaty of Versailles. Even though the loss of territory, military restrictions, and required reparations infuriated much of the German citizenry, sewing the seeds of subsequent unrest that would be even more tumultuous for humankind, in France, Belgium and the Netherlands, everyday life was being restored almost to where it had been before the war. People were in the mourning for the lives lost, but there was a new sense of hope in the air, and Mondrian knew he could move back to Paris.

He gave notice to the proprietor of both his rooms and studio in Laren, promising to have his possessions out by June 1.[1261] It was not hard to empty either space of what belonged to him. He was able to pack the few paintings that remained unsold from the five years in the Netherlands, and his small number of personal possessions, into two boxes. Slijper, more and more his aide-de-camp, agreed to have the boxes shipped once Mondrian was settled in back on the rue du Départ.[1262]

Slijper also agreed to buy the earlier paintings by Mondrian that were still in Paris, now that there was access to them.[1263] And Peter Alma purchased one of Mondrian's new paintings even before it was finished.[1264] These sales, along with Bremmer's monthly allowance to him, gave Mondrian a fresh start.

Focused on what lay ahead, Mondrian had no sense that in his five years of unintended exile he had painted what would be considered some of the breakthrough masterpieces of twentieth-century art. He simply dealt with everyday reality as efficiently as possible. Determined to get back to work in his haven on the rue du Départ, knowing he would again be able to eat and sleep under the same roof where he painted, he was dreaming of new compositions. As always, he would readily leave the past behind. Optimistic, eager to have his brush back in his hand as soon as he could, he booked his train for June 21 and bought a one-way ticket.[1265]

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[1261] 'ik moet hier 1 juni vertrekken.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, April 18 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136.

[1262] Letters Mondrian to Slijper, July 21 1919; September 12 1919, RKD #0613 inv.nr, 127.

[1263] See postcard from Mondrian to Slijper, July 5 1919 RKD #0150 inv.nr. 196; and a letter from July 21 1919, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 127.

[1264] '[…] ik kreeg van Alma wat geld, hoewel hij een doek al betaald heeft toen ik uit Holland ging.' Letter Mondrian to Van Doesburg, June 30 1920, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 137.

[1265] We know this date thanks to a postcard Mondrian wrote to Slijper from Paris on Tuesday June 24. He reported that, initially, he had had a train on Saturday, but at the Belgian border he was stopped and had to return to Rotterdam because of problems with his passport. Therefore he could only leave Holland on Sunday (June 22). But now he had arrived safely. Postcard Mondrian to Slijper, June 24 1919, RKD #0150 inv.nr. 195.

Theo van Doesburg had served in the Dutch army in the infantry. He had been drafted at the Noord-Branbantse Regte Heide, nearby Tilburg, in August 1914. While military service had never been a question for Mondrian, who was forty-two when war broke out, Van Doesburg was eleven years younger, and had served as a sergeant-postman, but because there wasn't much work to do, Van Doesburg had plenty of spare time to work on his writings and drawings. In the autumn of 1915 Van Doesburg was transferred to Utrecht. In 1916 demobilization took place and after he was discharged from the army in mid-February, he went to live with his mother in Haarlem, at least technically, but he mostly stayed in Leiden with Lena Milius. On June 11, when he was in the final countdown to return to France, Mondrian went there to say good-by.[1266]

Distances in the Netherlands are rarely substantial, unless you live in a place like Winterswijk; it was a forty-kilometer train journey from Amsterdam, where he lived after giving up his residency in Laren, to Leiden. Mondrian took with him two of his recent checkerboard compositions. He carefully unwrapped them in front of the person he considered his greatest confrere in the fight for pure abstraction.

Van Doesburg did not approve. He did not mince words in telling Mondrian that the paintings did little for him, and Milius was equally candid about her feeling that Mondrian was not going in a good direction.[1267]

Mondrian had not been so naïve as to expect the encounter to be a lot of fun. Even though he was inevitably flanked by a pretty woman, Van Doesburg never even tried to be charming. Invariably dressed in black and unsmiling, 'he was a strange man, with a narrow face, a keen eye, and much aggressiveness; there was in him something both of the bird of prey and the parrot. It was hard not to get embroiled with him even in casual conversation; he was naturally quarrelsome. And then he would spit venom, carried away by his own words.'[1268]

It would have been out of character for Van Doesburg to hold back about two compositions in which all of the rectangular units were of exactly the same size. But still, it was not the send off Mondrian hoped for, and even though Milius's opinion mattered less to him, the determination with which she voiced her disapproval was a further unpleasantness. After the

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[1266] 'ik ga over een week naar Parijs. Ik zou jelui nog graag even opzoeken. Is 't goed Woensdag na Pinkster tegen de koffie?' Postcard Mondrian to Van Doesburg, June 7 1919, RKD #0408 inv.nr. 136. Pentecost was on June 8 in 1919.

[1267] 'Judging from Van Doesburg's comment in his letter to Oud of June 24, Mondrian had brought with him one of the two *Checkerboard Compositions* to show Van Doesburg the latest development in his work. It is obvious from the lengthy report of this visit in his letter that Van Doesburg showed little enthusiasm for the development in Mondrian's ideas and work.' Joosten, *CR II*, p. 115.

[1268] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 149.

viewing, Van Doesburg would write Oud that it was good that Mondrian was going to Paris because, he quipped condescendingly, it might 'give him new possibilities in his work.'[1269]

Van Doesburg's own work was more ponderous and clunky. *Checkboard, bright Colors* and *Checkboard, dark Colors,* the canvases Mondrian showed him that day, have a tip-toe lightness, their simple pattern facilitating endless movement. By positioning different tones where he did in these compositions that were like graph paper, he created movement that goes, simultaneously, up and down, left and right, in and out. A device of engineering—a precise grid—becomes a vehicle for art that conjures Bach's harpsichord suites in the airy richness that emerges from spare and limited means. Yet even if Mondrian was confident in his own achievement, and most of recognized Van Doesburg's comparative lack of artistry, he would have preferred to be told that this latest advance was brilliant and beautiful.

If Mondrian had believed, during those years in the Netherlands, that he had true partners in his efforts to bring his Neo-Plastic vision to the fore of world art, he now realized that he had been deceiving himself. Schoenmaekers, Van der Leck, Van Doesburg: his spiritual kin of one moment were the troublemakers and enemies of the next. There were echoes of the pain he had felt sixteen years earlier when he had broken from his anarchist friends in Amsterdam for refuge in Brabant. But then he had been able to flee to Van den Briel and the local farmers like Hannes Dortmans. Anticiping his return to Paris, when Mondrian's train pulled out of Leiden, Mondrian recognized that the only person he could count on a hundred per cent was himself.

#

The trip back to France proved to be rougher than he imagined. On June 21, a Saturday, when Mondrian left Amsterdam on the Paris-bound train, he expected a speedy journey. But in Roosendaal, at the Belgian border, the authorities who came on the train were not satisfied with his passport. They made him disembark and instructed him to go back to Rotterdam. He had to resolve the issue before he would be able to leave the Netherlands.

It was a Saturday, with most government offices closed. Somehow Mondrian managed to settle the matter before nightfall. In a pinch, he always just did what was necessary. Calm and taciturn as ever, Mondrian worked his way through the bureaucratic hurdles, and got the official stamp on his documents. By the time he was done, he had missed the last train, but carrying his few clothes and recent paintings, he found a place to stay. The following morning he resumed his trip. Around 10 o'clock that evening

[1269] Letter Van Doesburg to J.J.P. Oud, June 24 1919, quoted from Joosten, *CR II*, p. 115.

of Sunday, June 22, 1919, almost five years to the day since he had left the rue du Départ —Mondrian was back in Paris.[1270]

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"'What will you do after the war?'" Jakob Van Domselaer had asked Mondrian one day in Laren two years earlier.[1271]

Mondrian answered his friend 'that he had done what he had to do.' With the art work he had made since returning to the Netherlands in 1914, he had achieved his goals as a painter. He saw no reason to go further.

He then told Van Domselaer, "'I'll return to France just the same […] even if I can't sell any paintings. I'll go south and work for a peasant, picking olives.'"[1272]

Mondrian had such moments intermittently. Like most of us, he had times of feeling he was a success, and occasions when he deemed himself a failure. On brief occasions, he could look at a painting on which he had been working for months and feel that he had gotten the widths of the lines and the balance of the colors just right at last. Or, as had occurred when he had told Van Domselaer that 'he had done what he had to do,' he was satisfied that he had achieved his artistic goals and could now relax.

But those moments of satisfaction, and a concomitant lack of ambition, were rare in Mondrian's life. It was never long before he was back at the easel pushing himself further. With one black line having the wrong dimensions or position, he would feel entirely off course; everything was wrong, and his work was cut out for him. At the rare moments when he became too discouraged to think he could reach his goal, he imagined himself giving up painting completely. But mostly he would persevere, and take on the challenge of making his paintings work according to his own standards. He had gusto; he could envision vibrant beauty. When Mondrian at age forty-seven returned to the rue du Départ, he felt himself renewed.

[1270] 'een maand geleden juist, bracht je me naar den trein. Ik schreef je meen ik op mijn briefkaart reeds dat ik in Rosendaal terug moest naar Rotterdam om mijn pas ook voor België te laten viteeren. Daar had men op 't Fr. cons. niets van gezegd! Toen ben ik den volgende dag eerst uit Rotterdam kunnen gaan en kwam om 10u. zoowat in Parijs aan.' Letter Mondrian to Slijper, July 21 1919, RKD #0613 inv.nr. 127.

[1271] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 134.

[1272] Seuphor, *Mondrian*, p. 134.

Conclusion

We end at a beginning.

In June of 1919, Piet Mondrian arrived in Paris. The journey was fraught with difficulty, but, as we have discovered by observing his steely determination and his indifference and wherewithal in the face of life's complications throughout the first fourty-seven years of his life, he remained undaunted. In Roosendaal, he was not allowed to continue the train journey southward because of a problem with his papers. How he managed to prevail by meeting with the authorities on a Saturday to procure the visa essential for further travel is one of those mysteries of the artist's life about which I yearn to know more, but have the biographer's sad reality of having to face a lack of information and the impossibility of even the most diligent researchers unearthing what cannot be found, and presumably no longer exists. We will never know why or how, on a Saturday in the spring of the first year of peace following the havoc that totally disrupted European life during the First World War, and left a record number of deaths in its path of destruction, Piet Mondrian had to halt his return to the artistic capital from which he had been exiled nearly five years earlier and then resolved what must have been an upsetting situation. What we do know, and what I hope has been clear in this biographical doctoral thesis charting Mondrian's formation as a human being, is that he never lingered over problems once they were settled. Nor did he have close emotional attachments to other people—family, lovers, friends—of the sort that make total relocation difficult. His ballast in life was the making of art. He lived with a singularity rare among human beings, and had the skill to support his uncompromising wish to make art that brought him and its viewers closer to what is timeless, universal, connected to what is lasting and, concomitantly, unrelated to what is too immediate, too specific in time or location.

I hope that in this thesis you have come to see that his perseverance, what others would term his eccentricity, his willpower, and his absorption in making full use of the eyes he worked so zealously to protect from visual arm, to an extent deemed neurotic by his three more robust brothers, were there from the start. His father's rigor was part of him, as was his sense that an independent path was his only possible course of action. Like the Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan who gave his first son his identical name, the future Piet Mondrian involved himself with movements, and tried mightily to spread his beliefs, but the organizations and journals and clubs that might further the credo mattered less to him than the credo itself. These were not people who wavered. Occasionally, they might contemplate the "normal," bourgeois, accepted way of doing things—as when Piet became engaged to marry—but then, each in his own way, father and son returned to his personal path. The most salient difference is that for Piet it was a route

toward joy and liberation, the latest dance steps and brightest colors fundamental to all that he believed him, guiltlessness and pleasure—for himself and others—major components, while, for his schoolmaster father, self-denial was a core value. Pieter Cornelis Mondriaan celebrate God, but He was the god of suffering and sacrifice; his son celebrate Life, and a spirituality to which it was hard to attach a name.

But even if he danced half steps, and quarter steps, and obsessed over rhythm, seen and heard and enacted, he did not life by half-measures. Mondrian would explore ideas with in concord and a sense of mutual interest with Schoenmaekers into the wee small hours, for the first year of their acquaintance, until he disagreed with him so vociferously that little time lapsed before they severed completely. As a young man, he had gleefully lapped up training with his Uncle Frits, a painter with technical prowess. Then the tide turned. The nephew accepted a complete schism to the extent that he consented to drop the second A of their shared last name so that Frits would no longer suffer the embarrassment and disgust of being confused for a painter whose work he could not remotely tolerate. For Frits, Piet's work represented an unacceptable break from tradition, and a temerity that rendered it ugly. Piet shrugged his shoulders at these differences; all that mattered to him were his beliefs and his art.

The Mondrian I have portrayed through his forty-seventh birthday had, at the time that we leave him, lived out almost a precise two thirds of his life. That is a coincidence. My task was to show his development until the time he left The Netherlands never to return, which was coincident with his rejection of representation in art and his insistence on the purist form of abstraction. That his life would be divided with a sort of mathematical formula was neither his choice nor a factor in my taking the subject to the point where I leave him. For in truth it is only in the final phase—the third act—that Mondrian became Mondrian as he is envisioned by the world the moment his name is uttered, the Mondrian for whom hotels and cafes are named and whose artistic motifs proliferate today on building facades and women's handbags and dresses by Yves St. Laurent and Pierre Cardin, as well as throughout the vast world of visual design, whether in movie titles or the layouts of magazines. He was, from 1919 until his death in 1944, both the person he had always been, and someone totally different—as much his own original invention as the interiors of the modest studios where he lived and the paintings of black lines, invariably straight and vertical or horizontal, on white backgrounds, with geometric forms of primary colors interspersed. He was always a radical; but then he became so radical that, by comparison, he was, in the stages of his life on which I have focused, conservative, and uncertain of himself. We all change; we all remain the same. Piet Mondrian did both with unequaled genius.

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NFW

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Summary

In this thesis, Nicholas Fox Weber delves in depth and breadth into the formative years and early career of the artist Piet Mondrian. As an art historian, Weber has, for over forty years as the director of the Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, worked toward a greater understanding of the true meaning of modernism, and the value of geometric abstraction as a fundament of human existence; by making Mondrian his subject, he has taken that exploration into new territory. As Weber explains, Mondrian, following years of painting representational art in which he made his subject matter woodland scenery, sand dunes, lighthouses, farmland, flowers, and men and women whom he knew, ended up determining that the pinnacle of art occurs only when it has no subjective representation whatsoever. Mondrian developed, in the course of his artistic formation, a passionate wish to avoid "the tragic"—his term for the natural world on which he focused—and a belief that the ultimate value of art occurs only when it consists of vertical and horizontal straight lines, these lines inevitably painted black, and, on a white background (consisting in most instances of more than one white, although the differences are scarcely perceptible) solid blocks of, either singly or paired or as a trio, the primary colors—red, blue, and yellow—positioned for maximum rhythm and movement. Weber charts the artist's life from birth until his move from his native The Netherlands to Paris in 1919, always focusing on the psychological and biographical factors that drove the artist toward the achievement with which he ultimately changed the visible world.

The Mondrian whose vision today dominates the fields of graphic design and architecture, whose name is synonymous with jaunty and rhythmic modernism, of whose paintings vignettes appear on the chicest dresses as well as lower-priced objects of every sort, and whose canvases are considered among the treasured masterpieces of twentieth century art, the ultimate achievements of the advent of modernism, started out doing sketches of local woodland, mastering the traditional Hague School style of painting with which his Uncle Frits made sufficient money to turn over the family haberdashery business to his siblings, and working alongside his father on a large religious painting. Weber brings us into the world of this boy and, subsequently, young man, who from earliest memory was unlike his three brothers, opting for hours in the studio over the rough and tumble, always with a nearly fanatical need to protect his eyes from injury. Weber paints a portrait of someone with a neurotic fear of insects—to the extent that the sight of a spider could make him scream loudly in the middle of a concert—and unusual social interactions, whereby he was either a loner or a habitué of dance halls, dating lots of women but, in spite of a marriage engagement that he quickly broke, becoming close to no one else.

Weber does his utmost to dispel the myths about Mondrian, to combat the biased profiles of the man that have become the public perception of him. Weber addresses the flaws of the seminal biography of Mondrian by Michel Seuphor, who knew the painter solely, while also crediting it for the elements that show insight into the artist's passions. While respectful of the prodigious scholarship already done about Mondrian in his work, including a detailed catalogue raisonné and two recent biographies, Weber tries to rectify their errors and present as balanced a portrait of a man who was elusive and intensely private. Weber's sources are, above all, Mondrian's own words, as written in letters and a play and in essays, and an unpublished memoir written about him by his closest friend of his formative years, as well as journalistic accounts of visits to Mondrian in his Paris and New York studios, and the handful of interviews made during the artist's lifetime. Weber's underlying objective is to present as much information as possible, as long as it is totally verifiable, while avoiding erroneous conclusions, leaving it up to the reader to make his or her own deductions on what can be known with certainty.

Weber's underlying passion is for the art itself, and his investigation into Mondrian's upbringing, his education, his friendships, his politics, and whatever can be known about his private life, has been undertaken with the goal of providing insights as to the reasons Mondrian painted as he did, and did so with such resounding success. Weber sees the early representational art as charged with many of the same passions and goals, the sense of spirituality and the passion for what is universal and timeless and lasting, as opposed to what is trendy and personal, and he explores the artist's development from a rather academic, but emotionally charged, approach to representation through periods when he intensified his colors, included symbolism in his work, and began to apply paint in a manner totally different from the technique with which he had been trained in the Academy of Amsterdam. Weber brings in Mondrian's early teachers, his family members, the other artists with whom he associated himself, the musicians and mathematicians with whom he became friendly, the collectors who defended him, the critics who opposed him violently, and everyone else in the range of characters who had an impact on Mondrian. Some of these people became central to Mondrian's life by the artist's own volition; others had major roles because of their positions in the society in which he hoped to flourish. Weber depicts the milieu in which Mondrian lived, and, at the same time, focuses on Mondrian's unique way of navigating his world, always with the goal of being independent in his pursuit of art that would be the mainstay of his own life.

Today that art is central to a great deal in the manmade visual world. With an overview of that achievement, and a focus on the details he deems the most pertinent, Nicholas Fox Weber has, throughout this thesis, tried to enlighten others and present information and insights with a clarity, and a mix of objective research and personal excitement.

Samenvatting

Met deze dissertatie gaat Nicholas Fox Weber uitgebreid in op de vormende jaren en vroege carrière van Piet Mondriaan. Als kunsthistoricus heeft Weber zich gedurende zijn ruim veertigjarig directeurschap van de Josef and Anni Albers Foundation, ingezet voor een ruimer begrip van de betekenis van het modernisme, alsmede voor het belang van de geometrische abstractie als fundament van het menselijk bestaan, en nu, door Mondriaan tot zijn onderwerp te maken, breidt hij die opgave uit met een nieuw gebied. Weber toont aan hoe Mondriaan, na zich jarenlang te hebben toegelegd op het schilderen van figuratieve onderwerpen als bomen, duinen, vuurtorens, boerenland, bloemen, en mannen en vrouwen uit zijn kennissenkring, tot de conclusie kwam dat het hoogtepunt van de kunst alleen bereikt kan worden wanneer er geen sprake is van enige subjectieve voorstelling. In de loop van zijn kunstzinnige vorming ontstond een hartstochtelijk verlangen om zich te ontdoen van het "tragische" – zijn term voor de natuurlijke wereld die hij afbeeldde – en in het verlengde daarvan ontstond de overtuiging dat de ultieme waarde van de kunst zich alleen kan manifesteren door de beeldende middelen te beperken tot verticale en horizontale lijnen, altijd met zwart geschilderd op een witte achtergrond (meestal bestaand uit meerdere tinten wit, hoewel de verschillen nauwelijks waarneembaar zijn), aangevuld met rechthoekige monochrome vlakken, ofwel alleen of in paren of als trio, in de primaire kleuren rood, blauw en geel, gerangschikt met als doel maximale ritme en beweging. Het leven van de kunstenaar vanaf zijn geboorte tot zijn verhuizing uit Nederland naar Parijs in 1919 wordt hier door Weber in kaart gebracht, waarbij hij zich steeds rekenschap geeft van de psychologische en biografische factoren die Mondriaan brachten tot de beelding waarmee hij uiteindelijk zijn onuitwisbare stempel op de zichtbare wereld drukte.

De schilder Mondriaan, wiens visie nog steeds zo bepalend is op het gebied van grafisch vormgeving en architectuur, wiens naam staat voor zwierig en ritmisch modernisme, wiens composities als vignetten voorkomen op de chicste dameskleding alsook op allerlei lager geprezen artikelen, en wiens doeken behoren tot de hoogst gewaardeerde meesterwerken van de twintigste-eeuwse schilderkunst, begon met het schetsen van boompartijen in zijn directe omgeving. Niet alleen bekwaamde hij zich gaandeweg in de traditionele technieken van de Haagse School, die zijn oom Frits financieel in staat stelden om de kappers-, parfum- en pruikenmakerszaak van de familie aan zijn broers over te laten, de jonge Mondriaan schilderde ook samen met zijn vader aan een grootschalige religieuze compositie. Weber brengt ons in contact met de wereld van deze puber en vervolgens jonge man, die vanaf zijn vroegste herinnering het gevoel had dat hij anders was dan zijn drie broers: liever zonderde hij zich urenlang af achter zijn tekentafel dan dat hij deelnam aan de rompslomp

van alledag, altijd met een bijkans obsessieve zorg om zijn ogen te behoeden voor schade van buitenaf. Weber roept een beeld op van iemand met een neurotische angst voor insecten – van een spin kon hij zo schrikken dat hij een luide kreet slaakte midden in een concert – maar ook met ongebruikelijke sociale gewoontes, waarbij periodes van afzondering afgewisseld werden met veelvuldig bezoek aan danspaleizen en afspraken met vrouwen, en toch was Mondriaan een man die het uiteindelijk, ondanks een door hem nogal haastig afgebroken verloving, moest stellen zonder hechte vriendschappen.

Weber zet zich ten volle in om de mythen over Mondriaan te ontzenuwen, om de eenzijdige profielen te bestrijden die de publieke perceptie van de kunstenaar zijn gaan overheersen. Hij besteedt aandacht aan de leemten in de cruciale Mondriaan- biografie van Michel Seuphor, die de schilder persoonlijk kende, maar stipt tegelijk aan welke inzichten in de gedrevenheid van de kunstenaar wij aan Seuphor te danken hebben. Hoewel respectvol ten aanzien van al het reeds verrichtte wetenschappelijk onderzoek naar Mondriaan en zijn werk, waaronder een grondige catalogue raisonné en twee recente biografieën, tracht Weber de daarin voorkomende onduidelijkheden weg te werken om tot een zo evenwichtig mogelijk beeld te komen van een man met een ongrijpbaar en extreem gesloten karakter. Webers bronnen zijn, bovenal, de woorden van Mondriaan zelf, zoals die te lezen zijn in zijn brieven, zijn essays, in een toneelstuk, en in de ongepubliceerde memoires van zijn beste vriend uit zijn vormende jaren, aangevuld met journalistieke verslagen van bezoeken aan Mondriaan in zijn Parijse en New Yorkse ateliers en de handvol interviews die hij gaf. Webers primaire doel is het verschaffen van zo veel mogelijk informatie, voor zover die gegevens voor honderd procent verifieerbaar zijn, zodat speculatieve conclusies vermeden worden en het aan de lezer kan worden overgelaten om zijn of haar eigen mening te vormen over wat met zekerheid vaststaat.

Aangezien de overheersende passie van Weber de kunst op zich geldt, is zijn beschouwing van de opvoeding, scholing, vriendschappen, politieke ideeën, en het privéleven (voor zover bekend) van Mondriaan gericht op het verkrijgen van inzicht in de motivatie van de kunstenaar om te schilderen zoals hij dat deed, en met zo'n daverend succes. Weber herkent in de vroege naturalistische werken veel van de latere drijfveren en intenties, zoals het geestelijke aspect en het engagement met het universele en tijdloze en blijvende in tegenstelling tot het modieuze en particuliere. Hij onderzoekt de ontwikkeling van Mondriaan vanaf een nogal academische maar toch gevoelsmatige instelling ten opzichte van figuratie, via periodes van geïntensiveerd kleurgebruik inclusief de toepassing van symboliek, naar het punt waarop hij de verf begon te gebruiken op een manier die radicaal afweek van de technieken die hem waren bijgebracht op de Amsterdamse academie. Weber laat ons kennismaken met de vroege leermeesters, de familieleden, de kunstenaars met wie hij omging, de musici en wiskundigen bij wie hij aansluiting zocht, de verzamelaars die het voor hem opnamen, de

critici die hem vurig bestreden, en al die anderen die van betekenis voor Mondriaan waren. Bij sommige van hen was de belangrijke rol die zij in zijn leven speelden een kwestie van persoonlijke betrokkenheid, bij anderen was de relatie gebaseerd op maatschappelijke posities waar hij voordeel uit hoopte te halen. Weber belicht de kringen waar Mondriaan zich in bewoog, en tegelijkertijd zoemt hij in op de unieke wijze waarop de kunstenaar zich een weg baande in zijn wereld, steeds met het doel zijn onafhankelijkheid te bewaren in de beoefening van de beeldende kunst die het anker van zijn eigen bestaan zou worden.

Deze kunst neemt vandaag de dag een centrale plaats in bij een groot deel van de door mensen gecreëerde beeldwereld. Met een overzicht van die prestatie en een scherpe blik op de in zijn ogen meest relevante details, heeft Nicholas Fox Weber met deze dissertatie ernaar gestreefd het begrip van Mondriaan te verdiepen, door zijn bevindingen en inzichten te helder te presenteren, met een mix van objectief onderzoek en persoonlijke begeestering.

Curriculum Vitae

Nicholas Fox Weber is a graduate of Columbia College (B.A., major in Art History) and Yale University (M.A., Art History; Fellowship in American Art). He places equal value on the education he received in Renaissance painting and Gothic architecture at the Loomis School, from which he was graduated Cum Laude in 1965, and where he was allowed to write a range of subjects in the visual arts. He is the author of sixteen books including *The Bauhaus Group*, *Le Corbusier: A Life*, *The Clarks of Cooperstown*, *Balthus A Biography*, *Patron Saints* and *Freud's Trip to Orvieto*, some of which have been translated into French, German, Italian and Mandarin. He has also written numerous exhibition catalogue essays, and as a journalist has published regularly in *The New York Times*, *Le Monde*, *Vogue* (US edition), *Architectural Digest*, *House and Garden*, *Town and Country*, *Art News* and *Art in America*. He has curated exhibitions at, among other places, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York, the Museo Morandi in Bologna, and the Philips Gallery in Washington. For over forty years he has been the Executive Director of the *Josef and Anni Albers Foundation* and has written extensively about each artist. In 2006, Weber established *American Friends of Le Korsa*. This organization not only assists with medical care and education in some of the poorest neighborhoods of Dakar and in isolated regions of Senegal, but recently created *Thread*, a cultural center with artists' residencies in the isolated village of Sinthian, in the sub-Saharan region of Tambacounda. He is or has been a member of various Board of non-profit organizations devoted to the visual arts, dance, and education.

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